Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
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Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles
Sacred Flames of Darkness

"WHAT WERE YOU SAYING ABOUT THE TEMPLE?"
Rio turned to look beside them. The voice had come from a young child that didn't look any older than Sora.

Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles

"AH..."
"WELL? COME HAVE A GOOD TIME WITH ME, YEAH?"
The girl clung to Takahisa, pushing herself up against his arm in a way that exaggerated her cleavage. The sweet scent of perfume and soft sensation of her skin invaded his senses.

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Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

The main character of this series who reincarnated as an orphan of the Beltrum Kingdom. Awakened as the transcendent one named the "Dragon King" after a deadly battle with a hero and was erased from everyone's memories. In his previous life, he was a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto.

Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A spirit whose true identity is the artificial creation of the Wise God Lina.

Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.

Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. In her previous life, she was an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.

Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently in the Galarc Kingdom with Miharu.

Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently in the Galarc Kingdom with Miharu.

Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently in the Galarc Kingdom with Miharu.

Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.

Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Was repenting for her mistake with her older brother Takahisa, but...

Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Awakened as a hero after Saint Erica's death.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Currently with her older sister Christina.

Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Escaped her home nation to oppose the Arbor faction.

Sendo Takahisa
Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.

Sakata Hiroaki
A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.

Shigekura Rui
A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.

Kikuchi Renji
One of the heroes from another world. An adventurer unaffiliated with any kingdom, until...

Liselotte Cretia
Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild. She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.

Sora
Rio's disciple from the life before his past life. Serves Rio after he awakened as the Dragon King.

Sumeragi Satsuki
Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.

Charlotte Galarc
Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Once showed strong affection towards Haruto.

Reiss
A mysterious man pulling the strings behind the scenes. Wary of Rio for always disrupting his plans.

Sakuraba Erika
The woman who caused a revolution in a minor nation. Fulfilled her wish after her battle with Rio and died.

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Prologue

In the Holy Kingdom of Almada, inside the labyrinth of the Holy Capital of Tonerico, Rio and Sora had just arrived on the eleventh floor, where they found themselves at a dead end with nowhere to go.

Elsewhere, deep within the labyrinth, there was a giant magic circle drawn in the center of a spacious room. A young child in white clothing stood in the room; their eyes were hidden behind long bangs, making it hard to determine their gender, and they didn't seem any older than ten years old.

The child was grinning in delight while staring up at the ceiling, when a man closely resembling the ambassador of the Proxia Empire, Reiss Vulfe, appeared out of nowhere, dressed in pure-white robes.

"Good evening."

"Oh, it's you. Long time no see."

"I'm in need of a golem, so I came to pick one up... What are you looking at?"

"There's someone rather interesting here. No, someone *very* interesting. How's the outside world been lately?"

"It's rare to hear you express interest in the outside world."

"Yeah, it just hit me out of the blue. It might even have something to do with why you're here to pick up a golem..." The child finally looked away from the ceiling. "Right, Fenris?"

They turned to the man who resembled Reiss with a mischievous grin. Fenris fell silent in thought.

"The two people of interest have sneaked into the labyrinth. They're exploring the eleventh floor right now," the child continued, returning their gaze to the ceiling.

"Oh, I see..." Fenris made a look of understanding.

"Hmm? Did that information just remind you of something?"

"Just reaching the eleventh floor requires a party of hero-class veterans, or someone at the level of a legendary hero. And you said those two are exploring the eleventh floor—not fighting or fleeing, but exploring," Fenris explained.

"Yes, they completely wiped out the monsters on the floor," the child

said with a shrug. “They’re now combing the area for a path to the twelfth floor.”

“In which case, only a handful of candidates come to mind. There are three people I consider to be extremely dangerous out there... No, now there are four. Two of them must be here.”

Although Fenris didn’t say whom he was thinking of, there were apparently four people that he was wary of.

“Oh? So there are another two monsters still out there.”

“The world is a big place, after all. There might even be others I am unaware of.”

“Well, that’s fair. Okay, tell me more about the two on the eleventh floor right now, then. I know one is the disciple of the Dragon King, but I can’t figure out who the boy is. He looks like a human in his midteens.”

“The Dragon King’s disciple, and a boy in his midteens? I knew it...” Fenris rubbed his chin in contemplation, then sighed tiredly. “If you know that much, you should be able to predict the rest, no? A disciple would never willingly obey anyone besides their master,” he added.

“Are you saying he’s the Dragon King? No way. I’d never mistake him for someone else. And even if his disciple is still alive, there’s no way the Dragon King himself could still be,” the child said with excitement, surprised to hear Fenris’s words.

“Of course, I don’t believe the Dragon King is alive either. But if the boy on the eleventh floor is who I think he is, then there’s no doubt the world considers him a transcendent one.”

“...”

“He most likely used his powers and caused the rules of god to activate, marking him as a transcendent one. Despite still being a human, that is.”

“Unbelievable... No human could possibly withstand the use of transcendent powers. Even a hero assimilated with an upper high rank spirit would die.”

“Indeed. But his status as a transcendent one is an unshakable fact. As is how he lived in regular human society until just recently.”

“Hmm. You sure seem to know the boy well,” the child said, interested in Fenris’s information.

“I just so happen to have some ties to him. Quite a lot happened before he became a transcendent one...”

“It sounds like you’ve been having fun while I’ve been in the labyrinth, Fenris.”

“If what I just said sounds fun to you, then I’m baffled.” Fenris sighed in exasperation.

“We finally have some competition. I was getting bored of being the only one to move any pieces in this one-sided board game. Now it’s getting interesting,” the child said in a pleased tone.

“Our plan isn’t just some board game.”

“Duty and enjoyment can coexist. Indeed, it is enjoyment that motivates us to do our duty.”

“Your opponent might be the Wise God Lina, though.”

The child frowned blatantly at the mention of Lina. “If the Dragon King is back, then I suppose it wouldn’t be strange for her to be in the picture as well... Although I thought she died alongside the Dragon King.”

“I have yet to confirm her being alive. But that goddess’s presence keeps popping up. It’s possible that she prepared something against us a thousand years ago.”

“That woman’s ability to see the future has always been such an annoyance. And she certainly always has been a shrewd one.”

Despite what the child was saying, the look of delight was returning to their face. It seemed they couldn’t hold back their excitement after all.

“Getting back on topic,” Fenris said. “The boy possessing the same power as the supposedly dead Dragon King has brought his disciple to this labyrinth. This could potentially be an extremely bad situation.”

“Normally, it would be impossible to enter the twelfth floor without my permission, but there’s a chance he may use the Dragon King’s power. I’m not a fan of skipping straight to the final boss fight—but should I eliminate them now?”

“No... As long as they remain on the eleventh floor, there’s no need to make the first move,” Fenris said.

“How prudent of you. We’ve got several golems sleeping there, and if I accompany you as the custodian of the labyrinth, the rules of god will be weakened to an extent. You should be able to fight with a decent portion of your original strength, Fenris.”

“If he has complete control over the Dragon King’s abilities, then we will risk suffering extensive damage. The situation is startling, but not something to panic about just yet. We should first gather information regarding how much of our plan they are aware of. That is, if they don’t descend to the twelfth floor first,” Fenris suggested.

“I see. Leave it to me, then,” the child offered eagerly.

“What exactly am I entrusting to you?” Fenris asked with a brief sigh.

“Gathering information, of course. We need to know what they’re up to, right?”

The child smirked fearlessly.

Chapter 1: In the Holy City Tonerico

Around the time Fenris and the child were having their conversation in the depths of the labyrinth, Rio and Sora finished their search of the several-kilometer-wide eleventh floor.

“There doesn’t seem to be a path to the twelfth floor after all,” Rio said after they met up at the entrance of the floor again.

“Sora couldn’t find any path downwards either. Please accept Sora’s apologies.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. If there’s no visible path, then either the path is invisible, or the eleventh floor is the bottom floor of the labyrinth.” Rio smiled at Sora gently.

“Shall we try digging through the wall?” Sora asked, clenching her right hand into a fist.

Rio looked around at the huge floor they were on. “If we’re going to dig, we need to be sure there’s a room on the other side. If we dig blindly, we could risk the floor caving in on us.”

That being said, testing every nook and cranny sounds exhausting too.

In order to know whether there was any cavity on the other side of the wall, they would have to send essence through it. However, on top of being several kilometers in diameter, the eleventh floor’s ceiling was several hundred meters high. Rio sighed at the thought of the daunting task.

But the eleventh floor of the labyrinth was untrodden territory for mankind. Since they had come this far, they couldn’t turn back without carrying out a proper investigation of the area. There could still be a hint as to why the Wise God Lina had made the Dragon King reincarnate somewhere in this place where the Divine War began...

“All right. Let’s use our spirit arts to check if there are any cavities on the other sides of the walls or floor. It may take a while, since it’s such a big space, but...”

Thankfully, they could make camp by placing the stone house down, making it possible to search over multiple days.

“There’s no need for the Dragon King to perform such tedious tasks. Leave it to Sora!”

“I can’t let you do it all by yourself though. Let’s split up the area.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. I want to work on it together with you, Sora.”

“R-Really?! Okay, then! Let’s do it!” Sora replied cheerfully, happy to hear that Rio wanted to work together with her. Thus, the two of them began their careful search of the eleventh floor.

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Meanwhile, in the depths of the labyrinth...

“It seems they don’t know how to reach the twelfth floor after all. But they haven’t given up looking for it yet,” the white-robed child explained as they stared at the ceiling. It was almost like they could see exactly what Rio and Sora were doing. Just what could those eyes hidden behind that long fringe see?

“The problem is whether they’re searching because they’re sure there’s a twelfth floor, or they’re searching because they don’t know if there’s a twelfth floor.”

“Right. If Lina were the one who ordered them here, they would know how to get to the twelfth floor. If they give up like this, then it means they don’t know there’s a twelfth floor at all.”

“That’s a good point... Either way, we can only watch for now,” Fenris said with a sigh.

“I may be a shut-in, but you’ve got things to do. Right? You can leave them to me and return to your own job, Fenris.”

“Things would be so much easier if I could...”

“Hey now, are you saying you can’t trust your adorable little sister?”

“You still don’t know anything about him. He wasn’t an easy opponent to deal with even before he became a transcendent one.”

“So you’re worried I’ll mess up and ruin the plan. Hmph...”

“Considering your personality, you’ll try to meet him as soon as I look away.”

The girl in the white robe laughed without shame. “Aha ha. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to choose the right location when that happens.”

“Don’t tell me... Are you going to find him outside?” Fenris asked, eyes widening in surprise. It was rare for his little sister to step outside the labyrinth.

“Of course. Going to see him in the labyrinth would just arouse suspicion.”

“Hmm...” Fenris made a contemplative face, reconsidering the suggestion.

“Besides, it wouldn’t be that bad of a move to make contact with them outside the labyrinth, don’t you think?”

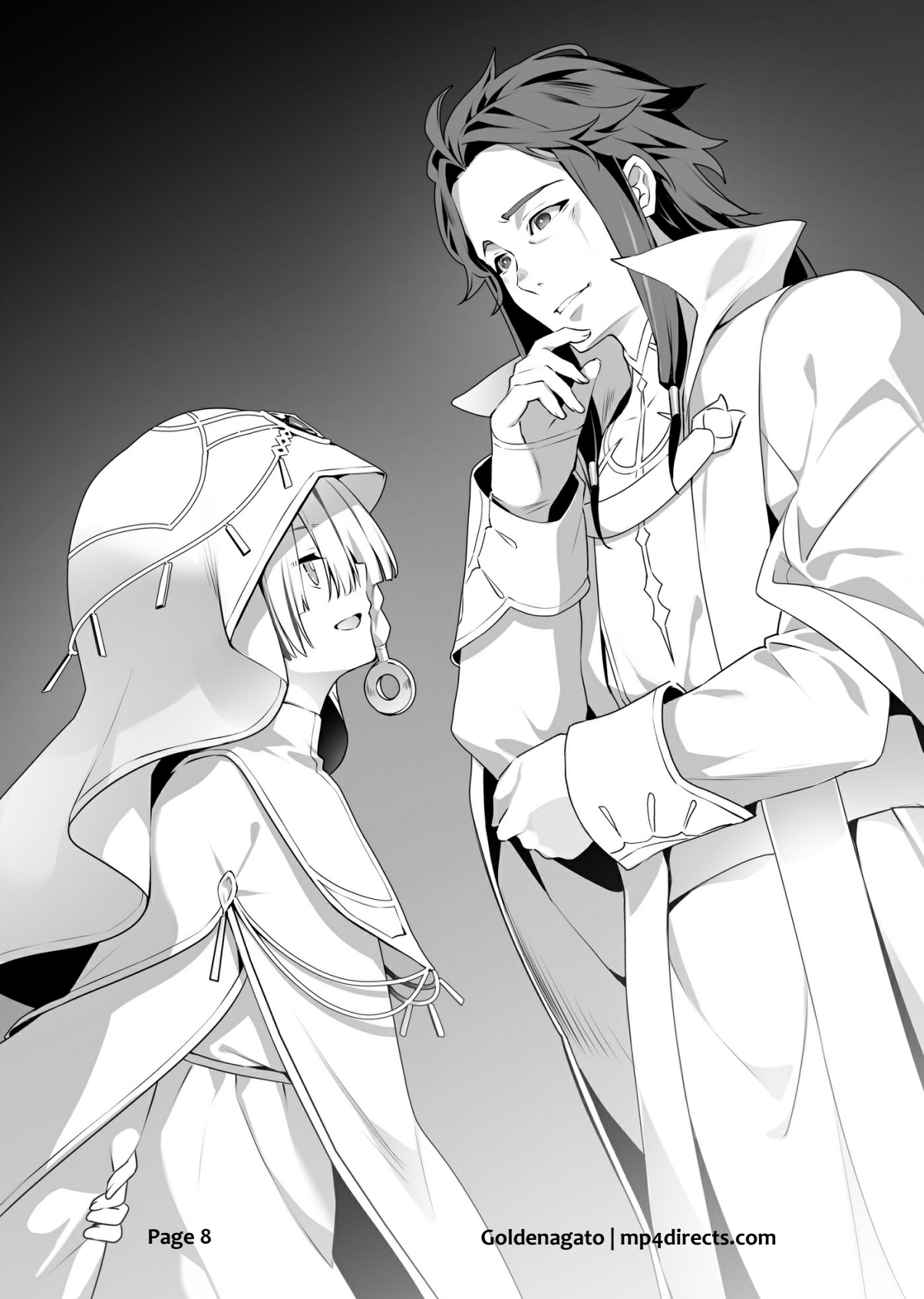
“You’d be substantially weakened outside the labyrinth yourself, but...”

“First you were worried I’d mess up, now you’re being overprotective of me. I guess you do love your little sister after all.”

“Your presence is essential to our plan.”

“Sure, we can go with that. So, how about it? Will you leave it to me?” The white-clothed girl looked questioningly at Fenris, who solemnly nodded. “Very well... You would indeed be more suitable than me.”

“Then it’s decided. First, let’s find out if he’s truly the same Dragon King as a thousand years ago.”



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Roughly one hour later, in the Holy Capital Tonerico, inside the official office of Pope Fenris Tonerico...

"Goodness..." The white-robed Fenris sat down in his chair with an annoyed sigh.

"Do you have a moment, Your Holiness?" A young woman wearing elegant white robes walked through the open door. Her name was Anna Mendoza, and she was a high priestess who served as the pope's secretary. There was a large bundle of documents in her arms.

"You may enter."

"Thank you very much for your hard work on the sealing ceremony over these past few months," she said.

"Yes, I am very tired. I must return to the sealing ceremony soon, so I would appreciate the time to take a break."

"You must not. There are multiple items that came up during your absence which require your attention. Please check them."

"This is why I didn't want to return..."

Judging from their conversation, Fenris had been absent from the palace for the past few months, but it was unclear what exactly the sealing ceremony was.

"Explain the situation briefly, Priestess Anna," Fenris said with a bright smile.

"Gladly, Your Holiness. The highest-priority matter to address would be the recent occurrence of rampant embezzlement among priests..."

Anna began happily explaining the matters detailed in the documents. Her eyes were sparkling with the overflowing respect she held for Fenris.

Meanwhile, Fenris listened to Anna's words with quiet interjections such as "Hmm" and "I see" every now and then. He accepted the documents she handed him and glanced over the pages while thinking to himself.

What bad timing it is to have my return overlap with his arrival here... Or should I be grateful that he's here while I'm also in town?

He looked out of the window in thought.

As long as he and his disciple are here, the defenses in Galarc should be much weaker. Now would be the best time to deploy the golems I retrieved, but...

The Wise God Lina's smirking face flashed across Fenris's mind. What

if it really was Lina behind Rio's actions right now?

Her ability to see the future meant she would have predicted this situation. She would also have been aware of how Fenris would move once he realized the enemy's strength was split. It was possible she had set up a trap against him.

That goddess truly is an annoying opponent to deal with... If I hadn't been reminded of her face just now, I would have launched an assault on the Galarc Kingdom without hesitation. If things went well, that would have eliminated Celia Claire and his contract spirit in one go.

Pope Fenris sighed regretfully at his own indecision.

"Umm, Your Holiness..." Anna paused in her explanation and looked at Fenris.

Fenris looked away from the window and back at Anna. "Is something wrong?"

"With all due respect, you seemed to be distracted by something outside the window..."

"I was merely thinking of some things as I was listening. I have narrowed down the departments that would have had a hand in the embezzlement of large donations," Fenris replied, setting the documents down on his desk. The income and expenditure of each department was written on the paper. Fenris marked the departments that required further investigation and returned the document to Anna.

"Y-You're amazing as always...!"

"All I looked at was which departments had sloppy calculations and unrealistic numbers. It's customary to turn a blind eye to those who pocket a small portion of the offerings, but I will go around the departments and remind them not to go too far. You can observe the situation to see if it improves after that and act accordingly."

"Yes, Your Holiness! Moving on to the next matter..."

"Please make it quick," Fenris said with a sigh.

I'll just have to keep an eye on the situation until the information gathering is done. It'd be troublesome if they ran into each other in town, so I'll get Renji to return to the Proxia Empire for now.

He returned to gazing out the window, staring at the townscape of the Holy City.

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By two days later, in the afternoon, Rio and Sora had searched every

inch of the eleventh floor's walls and ground using their magic essence, but in the end, they'd been unable to find the twelfth floor. They left the eleventh floor and returned to the surface.

"The sunlight sure is bright..." Rio mumbled, holding a hand up to cover his eyes.

The inside of the labyrinth was illuminated by glowing walls and ceilings, but it was nowhere near as bright as the sun. And their extended stay there probably made the sun seem even brighter.

"Oh no, the Dragon King's precious eyes... Please don't look straight at the light. You may harm your vision."

"Aha ha... I'm fine. I'll get used to it soon enough."

"That aside, how could that woman make the Dragon King stay in such a dark and damp place for two whole days...?"

"It wasn't Lina's fault we stayed there."

"No! It's all Lina's fault! She made you reincarnate after a thousand years and didn't bother leaving any proper hints. That's so inconsiderate of her! She made you waste all your time coming here," Sora ranted angrily.

Indeed, if the Wise God Lina had intended on making Rio do something with the Dragon King's power, she should have left some kind of clue as to what it could be. That being said, she was the one who knew what the future entailed. Perhaps she'd had a reason not to leave any clues behind.

"There there, knowing there weren't any clues is a clue in itself. Let's move on and head back to the city for a delicious meal," Rio suggested gently.

"A-A delicious meal...! Yes, let's go! Honestly, Lina should be grateful for the Dragon King's endless compassion."

Drawn by the offer of good food, Sora beamed like the sun above their heads. Thus, Rio and Sora made their way back to the Holy Capital Tonerico. Sora walked with a skip in her step the whole time, but...

There's something suspicious about the labyrinth after all...

Rio turned to look back at the labyrinth, unable to shake the odd feeling he had.

Over one thousand years ago, the Six Wise Gods had conducted an experiment here that opened a hole in the world. Monsters from another world had surged through the hole, triggering the start of the Divine War. And those monsters continued to appear in the labyrinth to this day. It was impossible to think the labyrinth was unrelated.

However, they had already spent two days on the eleventh floor investigating to no avail. No new monsters had appeared while they were there, and they hadn't detected any cavities on the other sides of the walls or floor. It truly seemed like a dead end, which was why they had decided to return to the surface. It also hadn't seemed wise to spend any more time investigating based only on a vague suspicion.

"Is something the matter, Dragon King?" Sora called out, immediately noticing how Rio had stopped in his tracks.

Rio shook his head as though to dispel his worries. "No, it's nothing. Let's go."

They gradually moved farther away from the entrance to the giant labyrinth. Not long later, following their footsteps, a single girl appeared from that same entrance.

"It's been a while since I've been to the surface. Now..."

The child in white robes looked up, stared directly into the bright sun, then lowered her gaze to Rio and Sora's backs in the distance and slowly started walking after them.

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After that, Rio and Sora made it to the Holy City of Tonerico. They headed towards the main street in search of a restaurant with an appetizing menu.

"During the Divine War, there was something Lina feared. I had assumed that it was related to the Divine War during her era, but it's possible it was something completely different," Rio said out of the blue while they walked.

"If so, there's no way of knowing what. It's all that stupid Lina's fault, so there's no need for you to do her bidding, Dragon King."

"But it's possible that we've simply overlooked something instead. Something to do with the labyrinth, even."

"Then shall we go back down one more time?"

"Yeah... It'd probably be best to go down the labyrinth at least one more time. But first, I'd like to gather more information about this area."

Unfortunately, they just didn't have enough information right now. They'd questioned some of the people in the city and adventurer's guild before they went into the labyrinth, but that information barely scratched the surface.

"Is there somewhere we can do that?"

“Hmm. There’s one place I can think of where we could investigate things...”

“Ooh! As one would expect of the Dragon King! Where is it?”

“The temple in this city. The people who govern this land live there, so there should be a library where old records about it are kept.”

“That makes sense! Let’s go to the library in the temple, then!”

“Yep. It’d be great if we could search the temple’s library, but...”

Rio had a troubled look on his face. He didn’t believe they would receive permission to search the temple’s library just by asking honestly. In this world where all books were handmade, they were considered luxury items. There was no way strangers would be given permission to enter the library so easily.

That means we’ll have to sneak in, huh... But even if we do, we won’t be able to stay in the library for very long...

Although transcendent ones had a hard time leaving an impression in people’s minds and memories, they would still create a commotion if they infiltrated the library and stood around reading without a care.

And if a commotion occurred, people would still remember that something had happened. If they increased the security of the library, it would become more difficult to sneak in next time. That’s why it would be preferable to find a way in without drawing attention to themselves.

Rio was considering his options with a frown, when—

“Hey,” a voice called out to Rio and Sora.

“Huh...?” Rio turned to look right beside them. The voice had come from a young child that didn’t look any older than Sora.

“What were you saying about the temple?” the child asked.

The child had an androgynous face and pure-white hair. Their long bangs covered their eyes, making it difficult to tell whether they were a boy or girl.

The white robes they wore implied they were a trainee priest of the temple. They didn’t wear any fancy accessories, and the robes were of good-quality fabric. Perhaps they were the child of someone high-ranking?

“...”

Even though Rio and Sora hadn’t been doing anything conspicuous, they had caught this child’s notice. Rio’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Huh? The Dra... Master Rio and Sora are busy right now. We have no time to be dealing with brats, so go away. Shoo, shoo.” Sora tried to drive the child away with a look of clear annoyance.

“Aha ha. You’re funny. Aren’t you a brat yourself?”

“Wha—?! Sora is a mature lady! What a rude brat you are!” Sora hissed, baring her teeth at the child menacingly.

“Calm down, Sora... Sorry about that. Who are you?” Rio asked the child.

“I’m from the temple, as you can see. I heard you mentioning the temple, so I was wondering what you were discussing.”

The child raised their arms and shook the fabric of their robes to show they were associated with the temple.

“I see. Rather than the temple, what we’re interested in is the history of this area. We were wondering if the temple would have any of that information stored somewhere.”

“Right. By the way...” The child suddenly approached Rio and looked up at his face. They were almost close enough to be hugging, making Rio’s face twitch in confusion.

“Umm... What is it?”

“Have we met before?” the child asked, staring into Rio’s face.

“I don’t think so...?”

“Hmm. Okay. Maybe it’s because we have the same hair color? There’s something about you that seems familiar. I see, I see... So we haven’t met before...” The child chuckled with a grin.

“Hey, get away from Master Rio! Who do you think you are, showing up out of nowhere and flirting by emphasizing how you match! You’re just a brat!” Sora snapped at the child angrily.

“Aha ha. You and I are definitely strangers. Yup.” The child took one step back, distancing themselves from Rio.

“I would never forget someone as rude as you,” Sora said with a huff.

“I don’t think I would be able to forget you two either. Oh, I haven’t introduced myself yet. I’m Eru. Nice to meet you.” The child offered their hand to Rio. Rio accepted the handshake.

“It’s nice to meet you too. I’m Rio, and this is Sora.”

“Hmph.” Sora turned away from Eru with a frown.

“Rio and Sora, huh? What a coincidence that the three of us all have two-syllable names. To celebrate new meetings, I’ll tell you a little bit about this land,” Eru offered.

“That’s...” Rio hesitated. This was a child they had only just met. Was it okay to make such a request of them so easily?

“Despite my appearance, I’m a low-ranking scholar of the temple. I’m

well-informed about the history of the Holy City, including the events that occurred in the Divine War era before this city was built."

"In that case, we'd be very grateful..."

They had just been troubled by the inability to search the temple's library. It was incredibly convenient for a scholar from the temple to appear with such opportune timing—a little too convenient, even.

"Then it's decided. I may seem young, but I'm older than I look. Don't worry," Eru said, wrapping up the conversation. Although they hadn't stated their true age, they hinted that it was older than they looked. And so...

"If that is the case, please allow us to do something in return for your knowledge."

Rio chose to treat Eru as a scholar, not a child. He placed his hand against his chest and bowed his head deeply.

"Huh, that's a flexible way of thinking. I like that. Not everyone can think that way. Let's see... You can treat me to something yummy. Also, I'd like to know more about you two as well. You're travelers, right? I don't know much about the outside world, so I'm interested in that," Eru said, smiling broadly. "Shall we go, then? It's been a while since I've been around here, but there should still be a pretty good restaurant nearby."

Eru started walking ahead of Rio and Sora.

"Hey! Who do you think you are, deciding all by yourself...?!" Sora grumbled, unhappy with how Eru was moving along at their own pace.

"We'd appreciate that too. Let's go, Sora."

Thus, Rio and Sora learned more about the holy capital from the child named Eru.

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"Come, come. It's over here."

The place Eru led Rio and Sora to was a restaurant established several hundred years ago. They stopped in front of an upscale-looking building.

"This sure brings back memories. How long has it been since I was last here?" Eru said, looking somewhat sentimental.

"Hmph. It's so obvious you're just trying to act like a grown-up," Sora muttered.

They indeed look just like a child... But there's something about them that makes them feel older than they look.

They spoke very intellectually for a child, and they carried themselves

with an extremely calm air. There were people like Celia who never appeared to age, so it was possible Eru was of a similar constitution. Although they probably weren't over the age of twenty, Rio wouldn't be surprised if Eru said they were in their early teens.

Besides, Celia had graduated from the Royal Academy and become a researcher when she was only ten years old. It wasn't out of the question for there to be other scholars of a similar age.

If anything, Sora's the one who's trying to act more mature than she looks...

Sora was an innocent girl in both appearance and everyday behavior. Rio glanced down at the little girl walking beside him.

"Hmm? Is something the matter, Dra... Master Rio?"

"No, it's nothing," Rio said with an awkward laugh.

"Come, let's go in." Eru led the way through the door.

"Welcome!" An older gentleman who appeared to be a host greeted them, bowing his head respectfully.

"Table for three. Can you show us in?" Eru asked on behalf of their group.

"Of course. May I inquire if you have a reservation today?" the gentleman asked, checking the ledger at the reception desk.

"No, we don't."

"Understood. A private room just opened up, so I will lead you there."

The gentleman swiftly closed the ledger and showed them through the door within. In the Holy Capital of Tonerico, the temple had a large influence over everything. It was possible they were only shown through without a reservation because Eru was wearing clothing clearly affiliated with the temple.

In any case, they were led to a private room and seated.

"I believe the signature dish of this store was the pope-style paeja, wasn't it? We'll start with three servings of that, thanks," Eru said, giving the older gentleman their order. He swallowed his breath in surprise.

"Hmm? Is something the matter?"

"Please excuse me, I was just surprised to hear such an old menu item. It brought back some good memories."

"Old? Does that mean the dish is..."

"Oh no, it's just been renamed. We can serve it without any issue. Three servings of the pope-style paeja it is. It will take some time to prepare, so we ask for your patience," the gentleman said, repeating their

order with the old menu name.

"That's fine. Why did the name change, if I may ask?"

"I believe it was over a decade ago now... Some priests that visited the restaurant pointed out how the use of His Holiness's title in the menu was irreverent..."

Perhaps it was because Eru appeared to be affiliated with the temple, but the older gentleman looked rather awkward as he explained why the menu item had been renamed.

"Oh, is that all? How ridiculous. My big brother would never be bothered by such things. If anything, you should have pointed out how impudent it was of mere priests to pick fault with a product named after the pope," Eru said with a dramatic shrug.

"Huh...?" Rio looked at them in confusion. The older gentleman's eyes were similarly widened in surprise.

"Hmm? What is it?" Eru asked Rio in a casual tone.

"Sorry, I'm just a little curious... By 'big brother,' do you mean...?" Rio asked hesitantly.

"Oh, him? Yeah, I mean the pope of Tonerico. Pope Fenris Tonerico. Even a traveler like you would have heard his name before, right?"

"Y-Yes..." Rio replied, face twitching from the shocking revelation.

"A-A blood relative of His Holiness?! I-I apologize for not realizing sooner!" The old gentleman paled and immediately prostrated himself in a panic.

It was a most reasonable reaction; in the Holy Kingdom of Almada, there were two leaders: the king and the pope. The king was the political ruler, and the pope was the spiritual ruler. The pope had sole sovereignty of the Holy City Tonerico, so it was natural for the older gentleman to feel awe in front of a blood relative.

I had a feeling they were no ordinary person, but...

Not even Rio would have expected them to be a direct relative to the pope.

"Please, lift your head. I'm not publicly acknowledged as the pope's little sister in the first place, so it's fine. Well, it's more like I *can't* be acknowledged, but you know," Eru said to the gentleman unashamedly.

Little sister. So she's a girl after all.

Her childlike, androgynous features had made her gender unidentifiable at a glance, but now it was clear. But what bothered Rio more right now was what Eru had just said about being acknowledged. Just what did she

mean?

“U-Uh...” The older gentleman stiffened, worried he had learned something he shouldn’t have.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, okay? The temple is in charge of numerous orphanages around the Holy City. I came from one of those. And that means... Do you know what that means?” Eru asked, purposefully making her words ambiguous.

“Ah, no...” Unsure of how to respond, the gentleman was completely flustered. Seeing that, Rio decided to offer a helping hand.

“It means you’re not a blood relative of the pope,” he answered in the man’s place.

“Exactly. That’s what it means.” Eru nodded with a pleased look. Rio thought she would follow that up with “That’s why we have no blood relation, so there’s no need to treat me so formally,” but instead—

“That’s what was decided. Officially, I mean,” she added with a suggestive tone.

“...”

A nervous tension hung in the air. Her words made it sound even more like something they shouldn’t have known.

“Pfft! Aha ha. Sorry, sorry. It’s just a joke. I normally shut myself in my room all the time, so it’s been a while since I’ve had a conversation with others like this. I couldn’t help but tease you.”

“I will refrain from asking how much of that was the truth...” Rio replied with a light sigh.

“Yeah, you do that. Either way, it’s true that I normally don’t make public appearances. Pope Fenris Tonerico has no little sister. So make sure you keep what you heard today quiet, okay? If you value your life, that is.”

“R-Right! Of course! The only thing I heard today was your food order!” The older gentleman nodded furiously, flustered in a way one would never expect of a high-class restaurant employee. It was quite understandable considering the situation.

“That’s right, we were in the middle of ordering. Did you two have anything you wanted to eat? Paeja is a dish that uses threshed grain husks. There’s plenty of other ingredients in it, so it can be quite filling. Make your order with that in mind,” Eru said, steering the conversation back to Rio and Sora.

“Threshed grain husks? I see...”

In other words, it was a rice dish. Rio could imagine the food about to

be served.

"Master Rio, may Sora order meat please?!" Sora asked, gazing at the menu with restless excitement.

"Of course. Order as much as you want."

"Thank you very much! Meat! Meat! Sora wants the sirloin steak. Five hundred grams done medium rare, please!" she said, making her order with the older gentleman happily. She was unbothered by the dangerous atmosphere that could be felt just moments ago.

"O-Okay. Understood." The gentleman nodded awkwardly, taken aback by her attitude.

"Aha ha. You're so absorbed in the food, Sora."

"Of course. What else is there to be absorbed in when at a restaurant?"

"Don't you care about who I am?"

"Huh? Sora cares about you as much as she cares about the weather of a thousand years ago. More importantly, Sora doesn't recall allowing you to call her by name," Sora snapped in a standoffish tone. The older gentleman's face was twitching nervously at the thought of provoking a relative of the pope. However...

"Aha ha ha! The weather of a thousand years ago, huh? You almost sound like you were alive back then. You really are an interesting one, Sora." Eru laughed in delight, completely unaffected by her attitude.

"Sora just said not to call her by her name. Don't act like we're friends!"

"Aww, don't say that. Let's be friends."

Sora tilted her head and blinked in surprise. "Hmm? Did you just say you want to become Sora's friend?"

"Yep. I'm just so happy to meet someone new I can be friends with. As fellow mature ladies, what do you say? Want to become friends?" Eru said without any shame at all, offering to form a new friendship with Sora.

"..."

Even when she got close to people, they would always forget her. Because of that, Sora had always distanced herself from others—that's what she had done for the thousand years after she lost the Dragon King. And her social awkwardness left her at a loss as to what to do now. Unsure of how to respond, she fell silent. But then...

"What do you think, Sora? I'd personally love to see you making more friends," Rio said encouragingly, peering into Sora's face from the side.

It would be one thing if she truly looked like she hated the thought of it,

but if Sora actually wanted to make friends...then Rio wanted to support her. Even if her friend would eventually forget her, that was what Rio sincerely believed.

"F-Fine... If that is what Dra— If that is what Master Rio wants, then Sora will make an exception this one time and allow you to call her by name. Ahem. Being a mature lady doesn't sound too bad either," Sora said, clearing her throat stiffly. The faint blush on her cheeks probably wasn't Rio's imagination.

"Really? I'm so happy. Let's be good friends, Sora."

"Yes. Sure," Sora replied, avoiding Eru's gaze shyly.

"I wish I had met you both earlier... But that means we wouldn't have been able to become friends like this. Things never go as planned." Eru stared into the distance and chuckled with a hint of sorrow.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything deep. Anyways, let's finish ordering first."

Sora tilted her head curiously, but Eru casually redirected her attention. They proceeded to complete their order of food and drinks. The gentleman who took their order quickly left the room, leaving the three of them alone.

"Now, you were interested in the history of the land, right? What specifically did you want to know more about?"

"Right..." Rio pondered how he would word his questions for a moment.

"Oh, but before that—Rio, you can keep speaking the way you did when we first met."

"No, I couldn't do something like that..."

"There's no need for formalities between us." Eru smiled as though she could see straight into Rio's heart.

"Even if you say that..."

We're strangers who just met—were the words Rio swallowed with a troubled smile.

"I see... It's true that we've only just met, but I still don't feel like this is our first meeting. Pardon my impoliteness... I'm just not a big fan of standing on ceremony. Sora and I are friends now, so I'd be glad if you could speak to me more casually too. Besides, I should look like no more than a child to you, no?"

"I understa... No, I get it. Is this okay?"

Rio gave in with a small sigh and changed his speech to something more frank.

“That’s great. Now, ask away! What did you want to know?”

“Are there any records of all the abnormalities or odd incidents that occurred in the past thousand years?”

“Abnormalities or odd incidents, hmm? That’s a rather vague question. Before I answer that, can I ask how much you currently know about this nation and land?” Eru asked, placing a hand against her chin in thought.

“We’ve only just arrived in this kingdom, so our knowledge is very superficial. For example, we know there’s a pope that rules this Holy City instead of the king. We know that this city and its labyrinth were the source of the Divine War. And we know that the adventurer’s guild here is the general headquarters of Strahl’s adventurer’s guilds.”

“I see. There’s one item in that list that is crucial to the history of this land. Do you know what that is?”

“The labyrinth, I guess?”

The Holy City and kingdom had an inseparable relationship with the labyrinth. Rio had no hesitation in his answer.

“That’s right. Well done. Then let’s start with looking back at how the labyrinth plays a part in the history of this land. First, this Holy Kingdom was founded 950 years ago.”

When the kingdom was first founded, Tonerico wasn’t yet a holy city, and the pope didn’t exist. Instead, it was the royal family of the kingdom that governed this land.

Eru got straight to talking about the labyrinth. “The enchanted gems found by defeating the monsters in the labyrinth were an attractive resource, you see. The king wanted nothing more than to pocket them for himself. But the labyrinth was quite a peculiar place. You might know this already, but there are times when a large number of monsters overflow outside.”

“They’re called dungeon catastrophes,” she continued, “and the first one after the end of the Divine War was especially big. According to some sources, hundreds of thousands of monsters were released from the labyrinth. As a result, the city that was here before the Holy City was wiped out. Damages spread across the Holy Kingdom of Almada, eventually causing chaos throughout Strahl.”

The first dungeon catastrophe occurred roughly a hundred years after the end of the Divine War, when the Holy Kingdom of Almada was only half a century old.

“Every nation was in an uproar, thinking the Divine War hadn’t ended

after all. They eventually settled on the conclusion that without their leaders, the monsters had suddenly fallen into a type of group panic."

This was because the monsters had seemingly moved with no particular objective. They didn't invade one area and turn it into a large-scale base like they had during the war, instead scattering about the Strahl region and forming small groups to live in instead.

"And so, people across the nation—and outside it—started expressing their criticisms and discontent with the king of Almada's management of the labyrinth."

Of course, there was no way for mankind to predict the movements of monsters. The monsters had rushed out of the labyrinth of their own accord, spreading out and living wherever they wanted. Since it wasn't a phenomenon caused by Almada, the other nations eventually decided that the Holy Kingdom wasn't to be blamed.

However, there were still voices of criticism despite that. Were there no signs foretelling what would happen? Couldn't they have forecast such an event?

"Well, that was how great the damage had been, after all. It's even said that all the monsters across the world today originate from the first dungeon catastrophe."

It was only natural for all the discontent of the kingdoms affected by the dungeon catastrophe to be directed towards the Holy Kingdom of Almada, where the labyrinth was located.

"The king of the time must have been at his wits' end. If another dungeon catastrophe caused damage across Strahl again, he'd have to take responsibility for it. He must have been desperate to escape the duty of managing the labyrinth," Eru said with an amused look. "But he couldn't abandon it. The first nation to be affected by a dungeon catastrophe would be Almada, which shared the land the labyrinth was located on. Besides, the enchanted gems obtained from the labyrinth's monsters were still an attractive resource."

That's why the Holy Kingdom of Almada had to continue managing the labyrinth.

"And so, the king came up with an idea. While he didn't want to manage the labyrinth directly, he still wanted a way of pocketing the enchanted gems obtained there."

It was a truly egotistical and selfish way of thinking.

"That was why the papacy and adventurer's guild were established.

The Holy City was separated from the kingdom into an autonomous region, and the management of the labyrinth was forced onto the pope. Adventurers would go through the adventurer's guild to explore the labyrinth and gather enchanted gems."

The kingdom audited the adventurer's guild, but its administration was independent of the nation. The kingdom had invested in its establishment, but there was no need for the kingdom to fund any further administration fees afterwards. It was a far more cost-efficient way of clearing the labyrinth than mobilizing the kingdom's army.

The problem was how to direct the enchanted gems collected by the adventurer's guild to the kingdom, but as long as the adventurer's guild of the Holy City existed within the kingdom, there were plenty of ways of getting around that.

The earth around the Holy City was extremely acidic and unsuitable for farming, so they were dependent on the kingdom for food resources. Just like how the Holy Kingdom couldn't survive without the Holy City, the adventurer's guild couldn't exist without the Holy Kingdom.

"Don't you think it's such a well-planned system?" Eru said proudly, almost as though she had come up with it herself.

"Now the question was if there were any records of any abnormalities or odd incidents that occurred in the past thousand years, right? The first thing that came to my mind was the very first dungeon catastrophe. Does that answer your question?" she said, wrapping up her speech.

"Yeah, that was fascinating to hear. There were a few things you mentioned I'm curious about too..."

"Sure, go ahead and ask them."

"Thanks. Then first, you said there are times when monsters will overflow outside the labyrinth, but how often do those dungeon catastrophes occur?"

"Hmm. It isn't that rare for monsters to overflow from the labyrinth. But for it to happen on a scale large enough to be called a dungeon catastrophe, I'd say it's about once every one hundred years or so? The most recent one was thirty-eight years and seventy-five days ago, I think."

"That's pretty long ago... And I'm impressed you remember the exact date."

"I am a scholar, after all. I'm pretty confident in my memory—though not as much as those Wise Gods, of course," Eru said with an alluring giggle.

“Right... That’s amazing. In that case, can I ask how large an overflow has to be before it’s called a dungeon catastrophe?”

“There’s no exact definition for it. Two thousand and a few hundred monsters was considered a dungeon catastrophe before. In fact, that was the size of the last one.”

“That’s pretty small compared to the first one that occurred.”

“The first one that occurred was the outlier. Even the next biggest one after that was only a few tens of thousands strong. They’ve gotten smaller and smaller over time, and haven’t surpassed five thousand in the past few hundred years.”

“I see. And it’s pretty much a daily occurrence for monsters to leave the labyrinth in smaller numbers?”

“Yup. But on a daily level, it’s probably ten or fewer monsters a day. A group of a few dozen might form around once every few months at most.”

“I see...”

“Is there something you’re worried about?” Eru asked, looking into Rio’s face.

“I was just wondering if there was any conscious pattern to the monsters’ movements. I know you said they were concluded to be a type of group panic, but what if there was something lurking deep within the labyrinth commanding them?”

“Oh? So you think something has been lurking in the labyrinth for over a thousand years since the end of the Divine War... Is that what you’re saying?” Eru asked, mouth twisting in delight.

“Yeah. If a large number of monsters remained in the labyrinth after the Divine War ended, it wouldn’t be strange for there to be a high-ranking leader hidden among them. If there’s a conscious pattern in their movements, it could serve as proof.”

“How interesting. The movements of the monsters are truly primitive. They will swarm together and fight one another at times, but they’ll rage and attack indiscriminately if they see a human. There’s no sign of intelligence or thought behind their poor fighting. Your point would be much more plausible if there were any sign of strategy or intention to their behavior.”

“What’s your opinion as a scholar, Eru? When you look back on the past thousand years of dungeon catastrophes, do you see any conscious pattern?” Rio asked, getting straight to the point.

“There really aren’t enough cases to investigate properly. In order to

determine any pattern, you'd have to analyze monsters' movements outside the labyrinth. But the only time the monsters won was the very first dungeon catastrophe. And I just told you how they moved, right?"

"After the city here was destroyed, they scattered without another target..."

"That's right. If the monsters had intended on invading the surface, they would have formed a base right beside the labyrinth. But the monsters back then didn't do that. They blindly scattered in every direction, searching for their next target to attack. There was no command or leadership. They all moved in random directions. Does that sound like they were following a plan?"

"It sure doesn't sound possible..." Rio replied with a sigh. It didn't sound like something any good strategist would do.

"If you look at the movements of the monsters that got away, you'll find they all just rampaged about as they pleased. There were no damages to support the notion they were moving with any sense of planning, and another century passed before the next dungeon catastrophe occurred. That's why the politicians of the time and the historians that came after them all concluded that it was a type of group panic caused by the monsters."

"I see..." Rio said while thinking about the labyrinth.

Is what Lina foresaw unrelated to the labyrinth after all?

There was still something about it that bothered him.

The labyrinth ended on the eleventh floor. At a glance, there were several thousands of monsters on the eleventh floor, but we defeated them all. Does that mean there won't be another dungeon catastrophe for a while?

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like the labyrinth was unrelated. In fact, it might even be a bad move for them to go into the labyrinth and kill so many monsters again. If they delayed the dungeon catastrophe, they could accidentally end up infringing the rule against supporting certain groups or individuals.

Rio fell silent with the look of someone hiding something.

"You're not convinced. That's what your face is saying right now," Eru said, bluntly guessing.

"No, the best case would be that it's nothing. It just feels like we've overlooked something. The labyrinth is a mysterious place to begin with..."

“Since we’re here already, I’ll answer any of the questions you have on the labyrinth’s mysteries too. You might never get a chance like this again, you know?” Eru said with an ominously bewitching smile.

“Thanks. Then first, about the ecosystem within the labyrinth: there are so many monsters gathered within it, yet there are no traces of any civilization. I don’t know what the monsters eat, but they’re not farming or raising cattle. Is it possible they’ve created a base or residential space somewhere that humans are unaware of?”

After that, the conversation moved on to the ecology of the monsters. Monsters were omnivores that ate everything from plants to rotten corpses. There were countless witness accounts of them eating dirt and stones in the labyrinth. They didn’t excrete anything, so they were probably able to convert everything they ate into energy.

Rio’s face twitched when he learned about how the monsters lived. Sora also pulled a disgusted face.

“Also, monsters are highly fertile, but because the females don’t have breasts, it’s hard to distinguish their sex at a glance. It’s theorized that the reason they have no breasts is because the offspring do not need to breastfeed. From the moment they’re born, the offspring feed just like the adults.”

“I see... How do I put this...”

“What is it?”

“Even though we’re both bipedal organisms, they’ve clearly evolved in a fundamentally different way from us humans. How harsh would their environment have had to be for them to evolve in such a way?” Rio mumbled quietly.

“Oh? A harsh environment, you ask. How fascinating indeed. Why, that’s a very sharp observation you’ve made. As expected of you, Rio.”

“That’s right! Master Rio is wiser than anyone in this world. Good job noticing, Eru,” Sora said, agreeing with Eru proudly.

“Aha ha... Thanks,” Rio said bashfully. They were the only people in the room, but anyone looking on would only see a man being praised by two children far younger than him.

“Judging by their biological features, your theory is quite on the mark. In the first place, the monsters are invaders from another world. To them, this world might just be a very harsh environment,” Eru added with a giggle.

“Right...”

In the first place, monsters were beings that turned to dust upon death, dropping their enchanted gems. It was only natural for them to have evolved in a completely different environment from that of the organisms of this world. If anything, it was a miracle that the humans and other creatures of both Earth and this world had evolved in such a similar way.

"Thank you for waiting."

It was at that moment that the food they'd ordered arrived.

"Whoa! It's here! The food's here!" Sora cheered at the mouthwatering scent of meat.

"Let's continue this after we eat. For now, tell me more about yourselves as we enjoy our meal."

Thus, Rio and the others dug into their meal.

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After that, dishes were carried in and laid out on the table.

"Now, this one is the pope-style paeja. Doesn't it look great?" Eru said, introducing the dish to them proudly. It was a round, shallow frying pan filled with rice, meat, fish, and vegetables.

I knew it. This is the "paella" I'm familiar with.

Rio looked at the pope-style paeja and smiled happily. Indeed, it was extremely similar to the Spanish dish paella from Earth. Rio had had his suspicions when he first heard Eru describe the dish, but he hadn't expected to be right.

"Yeah... This will definitely taste great. I'm sure of it," he said with firm conviction.

"Oh? That reaction almost sounds like you've had paeja before, Rio," Eru pointed out.

"Yeah. I can't say for sure until I eat it, but I've had something similar. The burnt parts at the bottom are the best."

"Oh! You know your stuff. Let's dig in, then."

"Okay. I think you'll like it too, Sora."

"Sora's looking forward to it!" Sora's eyes glistened with excitement as she stared at the paeja.

"In that case, I shall proceed to serve it," a male waiter said. He had a large spoon to serve the paeja into portions for them.

"Avoid the vegetables when you serve Sora's," Sora immediately directed.

"Understood." The waiter nodded with a smile.

“Oh? I can’t say I’m impressed to see a mature lady being so picky about food. Food is like life: it has its sweet and its sour moments. Being able to distinguish such flavors is part of being an adult, Sora.”

“Sh-Shut up. A true adult only takes all the delicious parts.”

“I see. What a perfectly fitting phrase.” Eru chuckled in amusement at the discussion.

“Here you are.”

The paeja and other dishes were served and placed on the table before them.

“Thank you. We’ll serve the rest ourselves, so you may leave now.”

“As you wish.” At Eru’s order, the waiter left the room.

“Now, let’s eat while it’s still warm.”

“Yup.”

“Let’s eat!”

It was finally time to eat; the first dish they all naturally reached for was the paeja. They scooped the broth-soaked rice onto their spoons and carried it to their mouths.

“Mmm!”

“Hmm...”

“Phew!”

Eru, Rio, and Sora all beamed contentedly.

“That’s right...this is the taste! This is the taste I wanted you two to experience. What do you think, Rio? How does it compare to the paeja you know?”

“Yeah, it’s delicious. There’s meat, seafood, and vegetables in it, so I thought the flavor would be difficult to blend together, but this is perfectly blended. There’s no stench to it, and it’s really easy to eat.”

“That’s right. Meat paeja, seafood paeja, vegetable paeja; there are many different variations of paeja out there, but the pope-style one has a mix of all of them.”

Next to the paeja conversation taking place between Eru and Rio, Sora was stuffing her cheeks.

“D-Delicious! This is delicious! Sora can eat this rice and meat and fish forever!”

“Heh heh. I’m glad you’re enjoying it, Sora,” Eru said, smiling with satisfaction.

“I don’t know if I can recreate the way this tastes, but I’ll try to make paeja for us next time, Sora. A paeja with just meat sounds good.”

“R-Really?! Thank you so much!” Sora beamed from ear to ear when she heard the paeja would only have meat.

“Oh? Can you cook for yourself, Rio?” Eru asked, eyes widening curiously.

“Yeah. It’s just a hobby, though.”

“Then I’d love to try your paeja one day.”

“Uh... Yeah, if there’s ever a chance.”

As long as I’m a transcendent one, that wish is unlikely to come true, Rio thought as his gaze wavered faintly from his guilt.

“Then it’s a promise. You have to treat me to your paeja someday. While having a fun conversation like today. Of course, I’ll prepare something in gratitude too.” Eru leaned forward into Rio’s space and made him promise her.

“Okay, I got it. It’s a promise.” Although it was an unfulfillable promise, Rio nodded.

“You’ve agreed, okay? Like I said earlier, I have confidence in my memory. I won’t let you tell me you forgot later.”

“Of course,” Rio said, smiling somewhat sadly.

“Oh, that’s right. You wouldn’t have to make such a promise in the first place if I just became your wife. That way, I could eat your homemade cooking every day, no? I know, how about *I* be the thank-you for your paeja?” Eru suddenly said out of nowhere.

“Mrgh?!” Rio choked on his food in surprise. Similarly shocked, Sora had her spoon hanging from her open mouth as she froze in place.

“Don’t worry, you won’t have a boring moment with me around. Besides, I’m better looking than the average person too,” Eru said, sweeping her fringe out of her eyes to reveal her face underneath.

Despite her young appearance, her smile was alluring. The face she revealed was indeed very well refined. She looked young, but that youth coexisted with a maturity that would make adult men stop and stare if they passed her in town.

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“E-Err...” Rio hesitated, unsure of what words to use to reject her.

“M-Master Rio’s wife?! What nonsense are you on about, Eru?! What do you mean by that?!” Sora snapped back to her senses and yelled.

“Well, Rio’s handsome, you know?” Eru said simply.

“Th-That’s...! That’s true, you’re right about that. You have good taste, at least.” Sora had been prepared to yell at Eru, but she instead ended up nodding furiously at the undeniable fact.

“How could you catch hold of someone so handsome without uttering a single word of attraction? Don’t you think that’s rude to Rio?”

“Th-That’s...true? You may have a point...”

To Sora, Rio was someone deserving of absolute respect. There was no way she could disagree with something complimenting him. Eru had seen through this and used it to her advantage, smoothly dampening Sora’s spirit.

“Come now, you still haven’t touched your steak. Eat up while it’s still warm, or it won’t taste as good.”

“S-Sora knows that! It’s all because you said something so strange! Jeez...”

Sora sliced the steak with her knife and fork and carried the meat to her small mouth.

“Wah... I’m so happy. This is bliss...” She smiled happily.

Eru lowered her fringe again and grinned at Sora. “You make the food look even better with the way you eat, Sora.”

Rio sighed quietly to expel his woes.

“You can give me your response to the wife matter when you treat me to your paeja, Rio,” Eru said with a mischievous giggle, making it unclear how serious she was actually being.

“Aha ha...” Rio laughed as his face twitched. Perhaps it was because he had broken out in a cold sweat, but the paeja he took a bite of to hide his awkwardness didn’t taste as good as before.

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Roughly an hour passed. While there were moments during their meal that bewildered Rio, he continued to ask Eru all kinds of questions about the labyrinth after they finished eating. Once all those questions were answered, they paid the bill and left the restaurant.

“Thank you for today. All of that information was really helpful,” Rio said, bowing his head at Eru.

Eru shook her head with a giggle. “It’s fine, I had a lot of fun myself. I’m really glad I met you two today. I’d love to chat again like this the next time we meet.”

“Y-Yeah... Next time...”

As a transcendent one and their disciple, Rio and Sora wouldn’t remain in Eru’s memories. They understood that better than anyone. Rio agreed with Eru with a sad smile while Sora peered up at him with a similar expression.

“It’ll be okay,” Eru suddenly said.

“Huh?”

“There’s no need to worry; we’ll definitely meet again. We’re friends now, aren’t we? That includes you, Sora,” she said, staring at the two of them.

“R-Right. Yeah.” This time, Rio was able to smile positively as he nodded.

“If I see you two in town, I’ll call out to you. Like I said before, I have confidence in my memory; I won’t forget your faces.”

“I see. We’ll look forward to that, then.”

“I will too. So let’s meet again, Rio, Sora.”

Sora shrugged somewhat shyly. “Hmph. Sora will consider it.”

“I’m not good at emotional farewells, so let’s just say goodbye normally.”

“Yeah. See you...” Rio turned to leave.

“Say, Rio.”

After they had each walked a few meters away, Eru stopped and called out to Rio’s back. When Rio turned, Eru continued.

“The information I gave you today is based on the floors that mankind has reached. I don’t know what it’s like on the deeper floors.”

“Yeah...”

“The various questions you have about the labyrinth... The adventurers of the Holy City challenge the labyrinth day and night in order to answer them. If you’re interested, you should go down the labyrinth and investigate yourself—to your heart’s content,” Eru said with a suggestive look.

“Right. I’ll give it a go.”

“Sorry for stopping you. It’s farewell for real this time. See you again.”

“Yeah.”

This time, Rio and Sora walked away from Eru. When Rio turned back

later, Eru was nowhere to be seen. She had vanished into the crowd of people walking through the city.

“That settles it, without a doubt...”

Eru was one-sidedly observing Rio and Sora without their realizing it. She was hidden at the entrance to a blind alley, watching the two of them.

“He’s a different person who possesses the Dragon King’s power,” she muttered with conviction. “But...”

A thought seemed to cross Eru’s mind as she silently gazed at Rio with a distant look. Eventually, Rio and Sora resumed walking and disappeared into the crowd.

“Now... I’m finally on the surface for once. I should go for a walk around before I go report to my brother.”

Eru giggled happily as she disappeared in the opposite direction to Rio.

Chapter 2: Return

Around the time Rio and Sora met Eru in the Holy City Tonerico, Celia was arriving back at the Galarc Castle with Aria and her mother, Monica. As soon as the enchanted airship carrying them landed in the harbor of the castle, Christina promptly arranged an emergency meeting with them.

After Celia had delivered Christina's letter to Duke Arbor, she had immediately set off for her home in the Claire territory to save her mother. The first half of her actions had been at Christina's order, but the latter half had been entirely at her own discretion.

Celia and Christina sat face-to-face in King Francois's office. Francois, Flora, Monica, and Liselotte were also present at the meeting.

"I sincerely apologize for acting of my own accord," Celia said before anything else, bowing deeply.

Christina let out a breath of relief before addressing Celia and her mother. "There's no need for any apologies. Lady Liselotte informed me of the situation. I'm glad you've returned safely, Professor Celia. Lady Monica too. It's a pleasure to finally meet you for the first time."

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Highness. Thank you for all the consideration you've granted my daughter and our family," Monica responded respectfully.

"I've heard that you were born with a weak constitution. How are you feeling?"

"There's no need for any concern. I'm in perfectly good condition, especially after seeing my daughter again after so long."

"That's good to hear. Now... Can you tell me what happened on your journey in your own words, Professor?" Christina asked, turning to Celia.

"Of course."

Thus, Celia gave an official report of the events that had transpired after she left the Galarc Castle as Christina's envoy.

As they'd all expected, Duke Arbor had set up a trap to capture Celia at the fort, but she'd managed to fight off his forces and escape to Amande. She met up with Liselotte there and sought her assistance, explaining the situation before leaving for Cleia along with Aria. When they arrived in Cleia, they encountered mercenaries waiting in ambush at her family

home. Celia and Aria joined hands to successfully repel them, and...

"After that, father remained in the territory and mother boarded the airship back to Galarc with us. It was all thanks to Aria that we were able to fight off the ambush at my family home. Liselotte, thank you for allowing Aria to come along with me."

Celia concluded her report with words of gratitude for Liselotte. Christina and Monica immediately gave their thanks as well, while Flora bowed her head silently.

"I'm just glad you made it back safely. Good work, Aria," Liselotte said somewhat shyly.

Aria bowed. "It's my honor."

"That aside... How in the world did you escape the fort, Professor?" Christina asked curiously, watching Celia's face for her reaction. It wasn't as though she doubted her—she valued Celia's abilities as a sorcerer more than anyone else. But no matter how skilled a sorcerer was, their abilities were generally specialized in magic alone.

Thus, it was hard to believe Celia had avoided capture in a closed space like a fort, surrounded by so many knights. Something out of the ordinary had to have happened. Liselotte had reported how Celia had left Amande by flying with magic, so Christina probably wanted to hear more about that. Sure enough—

"The truth is, I've recently learned a new magic..." Celia revealed.

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Roughly half an hour later, Celia was back at the mansion where Miharu and the other residents were staying.

"Celia!"

Everyone waiting outside the front door rushed over at the first sight of Celia.

"I'm home, everyone," Celia greeted them, looking a little taken aback. Everyone watched her as though they all had something they wanted to say.

"Wh-What's wrong?"

"I heard you were back, so I explained the situation to them," Charlotte revealed with a grin. With that, everything made sense. Celia's face twitched with guilt.

And the reason was because she had decided to deliver Christina's letter to Duke Arbor while being fully aware of the trap awaiting her. She

had asked Charlotte to stay quiet about it to the others in the mansion.

"The time limit on my silence was until your return. Since my promise came to an end, I told everyone without keeping any secrets."

Charlotte smiled at Celia as though to say, "You chose to walk into danger without telling anyone, so now you have to face their wrath."

"A-Aha ha... Umm... Well..."

"Celia!" Latifa cried, latching on to Celia in a hug.

"Suzune..." Celia hugged her back tightly.

"Why didn't you say anything to us?"

"I didn't want anyone to worry. It was my duty as a noble of the Beltrum Kingdom to go."

It had been decided in an agreement between the Restoration and the Beltrum Kingdom that the people of Count Claire's family would serve as messengers between the two organizations. Duke Arbor had also demanded that Celia go to the fort alone this time.

If Celia had ignored this demand and gone with someone else, she would have been in violation of the agreement. Duke Arbor would have had the perfect excuse to launch an attack on the Restoration—and to pursue liability from whoever had helped them along the way. It was why Celia had had to go alone, without relying on anyone else's power.

I can't let Rio and Aishia protect me forever...

And she didn't regret that decision. Even if she were to do it all again, she would make the same choice. Certain of this, Celia didn't have a hint of regret in her face.

"Umm, I apologize for making you all worry. But I didn't want to drag all of you into the mess of our kingdom once again. You're all important to me, and I believed this was something I couldn't rely on others for."

Celia apologized for causing worry, then conveyed her thoughts firmly. The others seemed to understand how strong her will was and swallowed their breaths. But that didn't mean they could just accept it in their hearts.

"Still, it wasn't very trusting of you..."

"That's right. It's great that you came back safely, but..."

Sara and Alma frowned in vexation. They had probably wanted to go along with her.

"It's okay. I've actually gotten a lot stronger while you weren't looking," Celia said cheerfully, hoping to clear away the heavy atmosphere. She clenched her fist and held her right arm up as though to flex her biceps.

Everyone gave her a dubious look.

“Aha ha...” Celia laughed awkwardly.

“Everyone, please scold Lady Celia more for making me keep quiet about everything,” Charlotte said with a sigh.

“My deepest apologies, Princess Charlotte.”

“It’s not something to apologize for. We have guests here, so let’s leave it at that. I’ll spread some half-truths later to trouble you, so be prepared for that,” Charlotte said, turning away in a huff.

“Okay.” Celia nodded with a smile.

Welcome back, Celia.

Aishia... Hi, I’m home.

Aishia chose that moment to speak while in her spirit form.

“Now, who is this lovely lady over here? She looks extremely similar to you, Lady Celia,” Charlotte said, looking at Monica standing behind Celia. Incidentally, Liselotte and Aria had also come along with them after they left Francois’s office.

“I am Celia’s mother, Monica Claire. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Monica took a step forward and pinched the hem of her dress in an elegant greeting.

“Huh?! M-Mother?! Of Celia?!” Satsuki raised her voice in shock.

“Yes, Celia’s mother.” Monica nodded cheerfully.

“Y-You look like you’re in your early twenties...”

Satsuki was seventeen, so she had thought Monica was just a little older than her.

“Oh my, how flattering. But I’m easily over twice that age.”

“Whaaat?!”

No way! She’s gotta be kidding! She looks so young—they look like sisters!

Satsuki looked between Monica and Celia with her jaw dropped.

“B-But I can see the resemblance to Celia... So her youthful appearance was inherited from her mom...” she muttered to herself.

“Pretty...” Latifa murmured in awe as she clung to Celia.

Satsuki and Latifa weren’t the only ones like that. The others were similarly wide-eyed and taken aback by how young Monica appeared.

“What a beauty,” Gouki accidentally muttered.

His wife Kayoko shot him a cold glare from where she stood beside him. “Yes, dear?”

Gouki cleared his throat awkwardly. “Aha ha...”

Celia smiled bashfully at having to introduce her mother to everyone.

“Oh my, so you were Lady Celia’s mother? I am Charlotte, Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The first to regain their movement was Charlotte. She smiled in delight and amusement as she greeted Monica.

“Why, I’ve heard so much about you, Princess Charlotte. Thank you for treating my daughter so well all the time.”

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“Not at all. Lady Celia has treated me just as well, so I consider her a close friend of equal standing.”

“Oh my, of equal standing? What an honor that is!”

As members of noble society, there was a distinct difference in status between high-ranking royalty and the daughter of a count. Using the words “equal standing” between two people of such difference was no trivial matter.

“I’m not the only one either. Everyone here considers Lady Celia a beloved friend of theirs,” Charlotte said, looking around at the others.

“Yes... I could tell from the earlier conversation that everyone treasures my daughter greatly. As a mother, I couldn’t be happier. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.”

Monica bowed her head low to the residents of the mansion. Everyone blushed in embarrassment.

“Ehe heh.”

Latifa was also one of those smiling embarrassedly. She hugged Celia even tighter, making Celia blush faintly too.

“Come to think of it, I still haven’t said this yet.”

Satsuki scratched her cheek and looked up at the blue sky awkwardly. She then looked back down at Celia with a gaze of friendship.

“Welcome home, Celia,” she said, happy for her return.

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Afterwards, Celia went inside the mansion and reported what happened outside to the others. The contents of her report were the same as what she’d explained to Christina and Francois, so she finished repeating everything from beginning to end in a few minutes.

Of course, everyone wholly trusted Celia, but what she said was a little hard to believe. They all seemed taken aback or bewildered, unable to comprehend immediately.

“And so, Princess Christina and His Majesty said they wanted to see my magic for themselves. They’ll be coming over here in a bit,” Celia said. She watched everyone’s reactions, then turned to address Gouki. “If possible, I’d like to ask you to spar with me.”

Gouki nodded hesitantly. As far as he could see, even as they were conversing, Celia was full of openings. It felt like he could overpower her easily.

“For now, you’ll just have to see for yourself.”

Seeing was believing. Celia wrapped things up with a wry smile, knowing it would be fastest to actually spar and show them in person.

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After that, Christina and Francois arrived at the mansion. The group moved to the back garden to hold their match. As everyone watched on, Celia recited the ancient flying-magic spell and wings of light grew from her back.

"*Alis Luminis!*"

Her body immediately lifted up against gravity, feet hovering just above the ground. Everyone was wide-eyed and speechless. They had heard the report of Celia's learning magic that allowed her to fly, but seeing it with their own eyes was a truly divine sight.

"Amazing! You're like an angel, Celia!"

Latifa approached Celia with sparkling eyes. She was about to throw herself at Celia at any moment.

"Ah, be careful you don't touch the wings on my back. They're made of thermal energy, so they're hot to the touch," Celia warned.

"Okay!" Latifa froze and raised her hands obediently.

"It's beautiful! You truly are like an angel, Professor Celia!" Flora, who had come to watch things, praised Celia too.

"Thank you very much. I'll take a test flight and show you how it works," Celia said shyly, before beginning to fly. She rose upwards before flying freely in the sky above the mansion at a rapid speed.

"Hmm..." Francois let out a fascinated hum at the sight.

Celia continued flying for another ten or so seconds before returning to the ground and landing softly.

"And that's how I fly. I used this magic to move around on my journey. Are there any questions?"

"This...is a completely new type of magic, isn't it? Did you develop it yourself?" Christina asked.

"No, this isn't a new magic, but an ancient one. I merely learned it by analyzing the spell formula," Celia said, mixing the truth with lies. In reality, she had learned several ancient magic spells out of the blue one day—the same day she'd suddenly remembered Rio and Aishia, who had become transcendent ones. But she couldn't say that.

"You...analyzed an ancient magic formula?" Christina asked with bated breath.

That was only natural. There were countless ancient spell formulas that couldn't be analyzed using modern knowledge of sorcery, but they were all more advanced than modern sorcery and believed to be impossible to use. Analyzing and using one was a tremendous feat.

In modern Strahl, there were only two means for people to fly: boarding an enchanted airship, or owning a flying beast. It was easy to imagine what would happen if a third option was added.

If Celia published the formula in a thesis, her name would be remembered throughout history for the achievement. She would even be able to amass enough wealth for her family to live in luxury for generations to come.

"Yes... I spent many years in Beltrum working on it, and I finally managed to succeed just before leaving for the fort."

Knowing that it was a little too far-fetched to have succeeded in analyzing ancient magic with such convenient timing, Celia held her breath while watching the expressions of those listening to her.

"Amazing... As expected of you, Professor."

But Christina showed no sign of suspicion as she openly praised her with reverence in her voice. She didn't think Celia was lying, and she believed from the bottom of her heart that Celia was capable of such a thing.

"Thank you very much..."

In addition to having learned the magic through no effort of her own, the fact she was lying to her former student who respected her so much made Celia shamefully lower her head.

"Then...would it be possible for us to learn that magic too?" Christina asked hesitantly.

The unvoiced questions that came after her words were, "Is it possible for you to teach us this magic too?" and, "Do you intend on publicizing the contract formula required to obtain the magic?" As someone in an administrative position, it was a question she had to ask.

Incidentally, when it came to newly developed spell formulas or newly analyzed ancient formulas, intellectual property rights came into effect. The details varied depending on the kingdom, but the law generally gave the rights of the spell formula to the developer or analyzer. Thus, if Celia claimed she didn't want to publicize the formula, her decision had to be respected no matter how useful the spell was.

"Right... I can publicize the formula necessary for a contract, but I

believe there are several problems that will prevent it from being used widely."

"Problems...?"

"If I were to put it simply, the magic chooses who can use it. First, there won't be many people compatible with the spell formula. Even with compatibility, the spell will require the ability of a considerably skilled sorcerer to succeed in forming the contract. Finally, once the magic is activated, flying itself requires a great amount of magic control..."

"So the number of people who can use it will be limited."

Specifically speaking, it would require the same amount of essence control that non-spirit folk needed to use the difficult flying spirit art. There were humans like Rio who managed to learn it with their exceptional talent, but they were an exception.

"It consumes a lot of magic essence too, so it chooses who can use it in that way as well. The spell formula itself is also quite complex, so it will be quite troublesome just preparing the spell formula necessary to form a contract. Even with my knowledge, I would only be able to support three or four—at most ten—people in learning it."

"In that case, can I ask that you submit your knowledge and the technique required for the contract formula?" Christina asked apologetically.

After losing their headquarters in Rodania, the current Restoration had no real usable assets. Even if Celia handed over her valuable knowledge and the techniques of the spell, she wouldn't receive much in return right away. However—

"Of course. Please use it as one of your playing cards," Celia agreed immediately. Even King Francois's eyes widened at her admirable loyalty.

"Thank you very much. Although it won't happen right away, I promise you will be compensated properly for this."

Christina bowed deeply, expressing her gratitude to Celia.

"Please don't worry about that! I have other magic spells I'd like to demonstrate too. Gouki, can I ask you for that sparring match now?"

"I'm ready whenever you are. Kayoko, please serve as the umpire."

Gouki nodded warmly and accepted Celia's sparring request.

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Afterwards, Celia and Gouki made their way to the back of the garden and stood facing each other, a fair distance away from Christina and the

others. Celia held a wooden one-handed sword and Gouki held a wooden katana. Kayoko positioned herself between them.

“You’re really using a sword?” Gouki asked, observing Celia.

“Yes.” Celia nodded. The way she held herself was nothing like a soldier—it was clear she had never held the sword before. She could barely hold the wooden sword intended for one-handed use, and she struggled to support its center of gravity.

I can only see all the holes in her guard...

According to the report, Celia had used a powerful physical body enhancement to fight with a sword. But now that he was facing her, it didn’t seem like she was hiding her abilities on purpose. Gouki tilted his head.

Furthermore, the onlookers watching them from a distance away could also see how unreliable Celia’s sword form looked. They looked on worriedly.

“You’re sure she’ll be all right, Aria?” Liselotte asked her attendant beside her. Aria was the only one here who had seen Celia fight with a sword before, having accompanied her on her journey. Everyone’s attention focused on her for her answer.

“Yes. I believe you’ll all be astounded.” Aria nodded with a cheerful smile.

“Please allow me to use two spells before we begin. The magic is necessary for me to fight with a sword and will not directly harm you,” Celia said, seeking Gouki’s permission to use magic.

“Of course. Go ahead.” Gouki was here in order to test that magic. He had no reason to refuse.

“Then... *Assumo: Gladius*.”

Celia took a deep breath and recited the spell. The geometrical spell formula that immediately surrounded her was far more complex than the magic for a regular physical body enhancement.

“That’s...” Christina murmured in surprise.

“Oh?” Gouki hummed in interest, bracing his wooden katana at the ready. The air around Celia had changed as soon as she was surrounded by the spell formula.

The way she held her sword, her stance, her center of gravity, the way her muscles were at ease—it was all perfect. Even the look in her eyes and her expression were now sharp and refined. She was like a completely different person.

Standing in the place of the girl who'd seemed like she had never held a sword before was a veteran swordmaster.

"Celia...?"

Sara and Alma, who often stood on the front line of battle themselves, had also noticed that change. They were wide-eyed as they wondered if that was really their friend.

How mysterious...

The corner of Gouki's mouth turned up in a smirk. There had been nothing but holes in Celia's guard earlier, yet now her guard was perfect. The light of the spell formula around Celia eventually faded.

"*Si vis pacem, para bellum.*" Celia used additional magic; another complex spell formula lit up around her, enveloping her delicate body. Then, the magic essence flowing from her body swelled dramatically. It was proof she had used a physical body enhancement only possible through spirit arts or ancient enchanted swords.

"This is indeed something else..."

Gouki instantly understood what had happened to Celia's body and used spirit arts to enhance his own physical body. With this, they were on equal footing.

"I'm ready," Celia said, letting them know the match could begin.

"Give the sign quickly, Kayoko," Gouki said to his wife without hiding his excitement.

"While the use of magic and techniques has been approved of, ensure that neither of you lose yourselves in the heat of the moment," Kayoko warned.

"I know."

"Right."

Gouki and Celia replied together.

"Then...you may begin."

At last, the match was to begin.

Both sides immediately leaped forward. They had been standing ten-odd meters away from each other, so the distance between them was closed instantly.

At the same time, they both swung their weapons. The collision of wood on wood made a deafening noise that echoed through the garden.

"Guh..."

Celia's eyes widened faintly. Gouki's lips were curled in a delighted smirk. But they both kept swinging their weapons without pause.

The sound of wood striking wood multiplied endlessly. They each kept their weapons moving in an attempt to land an effective hit on the other, but their opponent kept blocking them from doing so.

They stood there exchanging blows for a while, then both started running again. They would close in on each other and draw apart again in an attempt to outwit the other, using feints to read the other's movements and catch them off guard.

It was obviously a match between two masters. No one could believe less than a minute had passed. Time seemed to flow slower due to how densely packed each moment was. Every last observer was rendered speechless.

"Just when did Professor Celia learn such swordcraft?" Christina barely managed to ask. Her question was directed towards Aria, who had traveled with Celia. Before the match, Celia had asked her to take on the role of commentator.

"The first magic she used allows her to recreate the movements of a master swordsman. Celia herself called it something akin to cheating, and I wholly agree with her," Aria explained with a wry smile. The magic was able to replicate natural talent with swords and years of training in a single moment. Indeed, it felt exactly like foul play. However...

"Does that mean everyone can fight like the professor if they use that magic?"

"Theoretically, yes. But that magic is quite difficult to obtain in itself..."

It wasn't a magic that could be used by anyone. Aria explained how only a very talented sorcerer could learn the spell.

"Besides, it comes with more harm than good for people with a certain level of military training," Aria added further.

"Why is that?"

"The movements ingrained into your body over long years of training will become an obstruction to the spell. This magic exists for people who have never held a sword properly."

In other words, it was a magic for people who were blessed with talent as sorcerers but useless as warriors. It was perfect for Celia.

"What about the second magic she used?"

"A magic that has the same effect as the physical body enhancement sorcery found on ancient enchanted swords. You can consider it a direct upgrade to the magic *Augendae Corporis*."

It was a spell that allowed someone without an enchanted sword to move on par with someone who had one. They were both effects that could not be reproduced using modern magic.

Christina fell speechless once more and stared at Celia. Winged flying magic, hero imitation magic, hero cultivation magic. Celia had demonstrated these three spells in this short amount of time.

They should all be ancient magics that were impossible to decipher. And she managed to analyze not only one, but all three?

A world-renowned sorcerer could spend a lifetime analyzing such spells without any success. So how did Celia manage three at the same time? Was that even possible for Celia? Where had she even found undiscovered spell formulas in the first place?

No matter how much unconditional faith she had in Celia, even Christina was bewildered by the situation. And as for the two currently sparring...

Wow, I can't find an opening at all...

Celia had just distanced herself from Gouki. They were evenly matched. In fact, Celia was the one resolutely attacking while Gouki skillfully thwarted her.

I only had a vague understanding of how strong people who fought with physical weapons were until now...

She distinctly understood Gouki's strength now. Without showing it in her expression, Celia was extremely impressed.

"Shall we stop sparring here?" Gouki asked. Indeed, they had already succeeded in demonstrating Celia's magic for everyone.

"Could we fight just a little more? I'd like to know how far I can go against you in my current state." Celia requested the continuation of their match.

"Gladly. Did you want to use other magic too?" Gouki accepted readily. He was more than happy to spar against a strong opponent.

"Magic... No, I'd like to try fighting with only a sword."

It was strange. She should have been a sorcerer in body and mind, yet she was holding a sword and feeling excitement as a warrior. That was what she had just noticed.

"Saving the magic fight for next time, are we? Very well, I shall look forward to that. I will fight with only this wooden blade too."

"That being said, we shouldn't keep the others waiting for too long. I intend on finishing things with my next move, so please keep that in

mind.”

“Bwa ha ha! Sounds great. I never even dreamed of being able to banter with you in this way, Lady Celia. I accept your challenge!”

Gouki and Celia braced their weapons, ready to fight. Both sides fell silent in anticipation of the right moment to attack.

“...!”

That moment came within seconds. They both saw a chance of victory at the same time and moved.

Here he comes...!

Celia was currently able to process her surroundings as though everything was moving in slow motion. That was why she could see how Gouki was going to swing his sword and what path it would take. She made a sideways sweep with her sword to deflect Gouki’s own horizontal swing.

Just before their weapons made contact, Gouki’s wooden katana shifted trajectory just a little. He had seen Celia’s sword swing towards him from below and reacted.

The slightest hesitation was born in Celia’s sword path. She still attempted to correct her trajectory, but Gouki beat her to the punch. He had seen the hesitation in the tip of her sword and used that chance to swing his own with all his might. As a result—

“Huh?!”

Celia’s wooden sword flew through the air. She immediately retreated to retrieve it, but Gouki wasn’t about to allow that. The tip of his wooden katana pointed at her.

“I surrender.”

Celia declared her defeat, the strength draining from her body...but her expression was still bright.

That was amazing...

She was in pure awe of Gouki thanks to his victory. In the end, the match had been decided by Gouki’s combat instincts, developed from his many years of experience.

Although she had magically obtained the skill of a swordmaster, Celia still lacked the experience to make vital judgments under pressure. That’s why even though she knew how to move in her head, hesitation still showed in her movements.

That being said, it was enough to prove that Celia could fight at the level of a master.

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“Dear me, I have no idea how that magic works, but our fight had my heart racing with excitement. Bravo!”

Gouki openly complimented Celia. Thus, the match between the two of them ended with Gouki’s victory.

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After the match, Celia, Gouki, and Kayoko returned to where the others had been watching from.

“That was amazing, Celia!” Latifa ran over and threw her arms around Celia tightly.

“Thank you.” Celia patted Latifa on the head gently as she looked around at everyone’s faces. They all had varying degrees of shock in their reactions. And rightly so—she had just shown off three powerful ancient magic spells and faced Gouki on equal footing in a sword battle. Celia still had ancient magic spells she was yet to demonstrate, but this was already unimaginable for her compared to a few days ago.

Did I go too far? Hmm...

Celia hesitated for a brief moment, but soon dismissed her worries. She had already made her decision—Rio and Aishia couldn’t fight openly anymore. She couldn’t allow them to keep protecting her. She couldn’t make them fight. She would be the one to protect herself.

That’s why going a little overboard was perfect. Hiding her strength could result in hesitation when an emergency happened—something which she had to prevent.

“What was that magic?! It was so cool! You’re amazing!” Latifa praised Celia with excitement.

“I know, right?” Celia puffed up proudly yet shyly. However...

Huh?

There was something she noticed. At times like this, it was normally Masato who made a loud fuss first. He was being oddly quiet today—or rather, he wasn’t around at all. The same went for Miharu and Aki.

Say, Aishia?

Celia called out to Aishia through telepathy.

Yes?

Do you know where Miharu and the others are?

In the castle...

Not the mansion? Did something happen?

Takahisa went missing.

“Huh?!” The shocking truth made Celia yelp out loud.

“Is something the matter, Celia?” Satsuki asked in surprise.

“Oh, no... I was just wondering where Miharu and the others went. Did something happen while I was gone?”

Celia attempted bringing up the topic awkwardly. A shadow fell across Satsuki’s face.

“Yes, in fact... Something did...”

Satsuki frowned bitterly and hesitated for a long moment before reluctantly answering with an affirmative.

“What happened...?”

“Looks like it’s our turn to do some explaining. Let’s move locations first.”

With a heavy sigh, Satsuki invited Celia back to the mansion.

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While Christina and the others returned to the castle with Francois, Celia relocated to a drawing room of the mansion with Satsuki, Charlotte, and Sara. She had just finished listening to the explanation of what had happened at the mansion during her absence.

“And so, it’s believed he ran from the castle this morning,” Satsuki said in summary.

“I can’t believe that happened while I was away... No wonder Miharu and the others weren’t around.”

“The three of them are at the castle with Princess Lilianna, waiting for a report from the search party.”

Satsuki had been with them earlier, but she had slipped away when she heard Celia had returned on behalf of the others.

“Have you found any clues on where Sir Takahisa was headed?”

“The hero’s facial features and hair color are unusual in the Strahl region. If he’s still in the city, he should be found within a few days,” Charlotte said, anticipating the search party’s success.

However, the physical abilities of a hero controlling a Divine Arms were superhuman. They could run fast enough to outspeed a wild beast, and they could easily jump over a ten-meter-high wall if they tried. Takahisa had probably left the castle using those abilities. They couldn’t assume he had moved within the range of a regular person.

“About that... If possible, I’d like to assist in the search,” Sara said, raising her hand.

“Lady Sara?”

“The spirit I’m contracted to, Hel, has a very sharp nose. I heard you were using dogs in the search party around the castle, so I’d like to join the search with your permission. Hel and I are able to communicate easily, so there’s a lot more information I can obtain.”

Even without relying on Hel, Sara was a werewolf herself. Her own nose was sharper than any human’s. While the distance she could smell was limited to a few meters, she was able to track someone down as long as the scent continued.

However, although she had revealed her spirit arts and contract spirit to them, the fact she was a werebeast was still secret. That’s why she volunteered using Hel as a reason.

“In that case, it would be very reassuring to have you...” Satsuki said, looking over at Charlotte. As royalty, her opinion was the most important.

“Won’t your contract spirit attract a lot of attention? Taking Hel around the city might cause unnecessary panic.”

Charlotte had seen Hel’s form before, and it had been big enough to swallow a human whole. It wasn’t hard to imagine how the people would react if she brought a giant wolf into town.

“The size of a spirit can be adjusted to an extent. The smaller end is closer to the size of a large dog, so the people in the city shouldn’t have anything to fear.”

Sara dispelled Charlotte’s concerns.

“In that case... I will explain things to father and obtain his permission. It will be evening soon, so could you join the search party tomorrow morning? I’ll assign my personal guards to you so that you can move around freely.”

Of course, the final right to decide remained with King Francois, but it was very likely he would agree. With that in mind, Charlotte gave her provisional permission. Charlotte’s guards also served as the guards of the mansion, so they were on familiar terms with Sara already.

“Just what is he doing, causing so much trouble and making everyone worry about him...?” Satsuki muttered bitterly, biting her lip. She had a lot of conflicted feelings about the current situation.

“Are Miharu and the others okay?” Celia was concerned about the mental condition of the others, who must have been shocked by Takahisa’s disappearance.

“The three have their own thoughts about what happened... I just hope

they don’t feel responsible for it.” Despite Satsuki’s words, her own expression was gloomy with guilt.

“Hopefully he comes back soon. Thankfully, Lady Sara will be helping out too. Maybe he’ll even wander back when he gets hungry,” Charlotte said, trying to cheer Satsuki up in her own way.

“That would be for the best...” Satsuki finally smiled, although it was a weak one. “I just hope he didn’t wander someplace strange...” she murmured, gazing out the window with a distant look.

Chapter 3: The World outside the Castle

Early in the morning, on the day Celia returned to the Galarc Castle...

“Huff... Huff...”

Takahisa had sneaked out of his room in the castle. And before he knew it, he had slipped past the guards and was climbing the castle’s outer wall.

“Hah, huff, hah...”

Soon, he was over the wall. He was sweating along his brow as he ran frantically through the noble district.

“Hah, hah, hah, huff, huff...”

Even though his Divine Arms was supposed to have been activated, the heaviness in his feet felt as if he were dragging an iron ball. The beating in his chest was only getting faster. He couldn’t breathe properly.

“Hah... Hah...”

He recklessly ran up the ten-meter stone wall around the noble district like a wild beast. At the top of the wall, he looked down across the commoner town.

It was pitch-dark, making it difficult to see the ground. He wasn’t the best with heights, but he grabbed at the parts of the wall that stuck out and descended. Eventually, his feet reached the ground, and he began running away from the castle once again.

The key points of the noble district were illuminated by lights, but the commoner town was dark with very few lights. He continued down the road by relying on the moonlight, walking for two or three minutes before coming to a stop. He gazed at the Galarc Castle in the distance, illuminated by the moon.

You’re the worst, Takahisa.

Miharu’s angry face flashed through his mind. It was the first time he had seen her get so angry, much less slap him across the face.

I don’t like you, Takahisa. I hate you. I won’t be with you. I don’t want to be near you. Don’t show your face in front of me ever again.

Miharu had rejected him with those words. She had told him to return to Centostella and never go near her again. She was clearly furious with him.

No, it wasn’t only Miharu. Lilianna, Aki, Masato, and Satsuki... Everyone had rejected him. As proof of that, not a single person had allowed him to remain in the Galarc Kingdom. There hadn’t been a single person on Takahisa’s side.

The only choice he had left was to wait until morning to board the enchanted airship back to the Centostella Kingdom. However...

“I don’t want to...” Takahisa shook his head in fear, backing farther away from the castle.

No. I don’t want to. I don’t want to go back to Centostella!

He wanted to stay in the Galarc Castle. But no one would allow that. In another two or three hours, the day would break and he would have been forcefully sent back. Unable to accept that option, Takahisa had slipped out of the castle before he knew it.

He was contradicting himself. He wanted to stay in the Galarc Castle, yet he’d run from the Galarc Castle of his own accord.

“Hah... Huff, huff, hah... Hah...”

His calming breath quickened once more as the throbbing in his heart came back with a vengeance. Hours had passed since Miharu slapped him, yet his left cheek still felt like it was stinging with pain.

“Gah!”

In order to take his mind off the pain, Takahisa dug his nails into his left cheek. He then unsteadily resumed walking, disappearing into the darkness of the town.

◇ ◇ ◇

How long had he been wandering around the dark capital city?

Takahisa kept wandering through the dark until he ended up in an alleyway far from the main road. He crouched down at the dead end and hugged his knees.

However, the people of this world rose early in the morning. By the time the sun rose, people were already walking around the city.

Hearing the bustle coming from the main street, Takahisa began to feel uncomfortable. He started moving again, changing locations to somewhere less populated. Eventually, he reached an area that was completely silent. No one should come here. With that thought, Takahisa crouched back down in another alley. He didn’t want to see anyone. He didn’t want to speak to anyone. He wanted to be left alone.

He didn’t want to think about what was going on at the castle. He

didn’t want to think about his current situation. He didn’t want to think about what he would do from here. He wanted to stop recalling how Miharu had slapped him. He didn’t want to face reality. He wanted to stop thinking altogether.

Yet... Was the castle in an uproar now that it was morning? Would everyone be even more mad at him? Wouldn’t it be better to go back? Such thoughts crossed his mind one after another. He wanted to clear his mind, yet he couldn’t. Each time that happened, Takahisa strengthened his grip around his knees.

But it hurt to keep recalling those unwanted thoughts. Thanks to that, his mental state was a mess, dulling his ability to think clearly. He could dismiss the unwanted thoughts as unwanted thoughts without staring directly at reality.

Thus, Takahisa simply waited for time to pass in the deserted alleyway.

◇ ◇ ◇

At some point, the sun had begun to fall again. It was proof that over half a day had passed since Takahisa left the castle. At the same time, the silence that had continued during the daytime came to an abrupt end. As early evening approached, the number of people walking through the streets increased. Takahisa initially ignored it, thinking it was temporary, but the silence never returned.

He slowly stood up in preparation to relocate again. But when he stepped out of the alley and onto the street, voluptuous women in revealing clothing were walking before him.

“Wh—”

And there were just as many men around, ogling at them. Takahisa gasped and froze where he stood.

He was in the red-light district. It was an area that bordered the slums of the capital, and was known for being one of the capital’s more dangerous areas.

It seemed that most people here started working as dusk approached. Some people were proactively calling out to the opposite sex, while others that had already reached an agreement were walking arm in arm intimately.

Furthermore, there was a vulgar man with a sharp look in his eyes hidden at the corner of the main road. He was closely observing the people walking the streets, and he spotted Takahisa standing around in a daze

after leaving the alleyway.

"Hmm?"

The man gave Takahisa a measuring look. There were brothel workers beside him, so perhaps he was a manager of a brothel? The man didn't appear to have come to the red-light district to play around.

What is this place...?

Meanwhile, the scent of sweet perfume wafting in the air finally made Takahisa start thinking again, and he realized what kind of place he was in. Immediately feeling uncomfortable, Takahisa stepped into the road with the intention of leaving the red-light district right away. But before he could do so, someone called out to him.

"Hey, hey."

"Huh?"

It was a young woman. She was one of the brothel workers who had been beside the man observing the road from the corner just now. She appeared to be the same age as Takahisa, and she clung to his arm while calling out to him sweetly.

Takahisa paused and looked at the girl silently. There was no vitality in his gaze.

"Oh..." The girl gulped, feeling intimidated.

"What?"

"Oh, um..." She had probably approached Takahisa as a brothel worker seeking work, but his reaction was more indifferent than she had expected. She was at a loss for words.

"If you don't need anything, leave me alone."

The usual Takahisa would have shown a more innocent reaction, but he shook her arm off him curtly and tried to leave.

"Ah! H-Hey! Wait! Didn't you come here to enjoy yourself?"

The girl hurried after Takahisa and clung to him, pushing herself up against his arm in a way that exaggerated her cleavage. The sweet scent of perfume and soft sensation of her skin invaded his senses.

"I did not." Takahisa finally shook his head with an awkward look.

The glimpse of a reaction fitting for a man his age made the girl exhale quietly in relief.

"But surely you want to enjoy yourself? You've got money, right?" she said, seducing him resolutely.

"I don't," Takahisa immediately replied. He had lived without the need to use money from the moment he came to this world, and he'd left the

castle with only the clothes on his back. That's why he naturally didn't have a coin to his name.

"You're lying! You're wearing such nice clothes, you have to be from a rich family. Are you a noble?"

"Huh? Oh, this..." Takahisa looked down at his body and the clothes he was wearing. It was the outfit the royal family had ordered for the kingdom's hero. Of course it looked expensive.

In fact, he stood out blatantly. Under the sun that was yet to completely set, Takahisa drew all the attention in the red-light district. Even now, the people operating the brothels were eyeing him like he was an easy mark with a lot of money. That was also why the girl had called out to him in the first place.

"Well? Come have a good time with me, yeah?"

The girl strengthened her grip around his arm and continued her seduction. She then shot a glance at the man hiding at the street corner to check his expression. The man jerked his chin as though to tell her to seduce him more assertively.

"I said I'm not here for that. I didn't know what this place was, and I wouldn't have come to a place like this if I'd known."

"A place like this, huh? Right. A young and privileged person like you wouldn't waste your time with a woman like me working 'in a place like this'..."

"I'm not privileged," Takahisa said in a vexed tone. "I really don't have any money on me. Besides..." He trailed off midsentence.

"Besides?"

"I have someone I love already..." he mumbled with a bitter frown.

The girl caught her breath. Perhaps she didn't understand the reason why someone would say they loved someone with such a pained look.

"That's how it is, so..." Takahisa shook his arm free again.

"Ah..." The girl tried to reach out again, but Takahisa had already started marching away. The vulgar man was still hiding at the corner of the road, glaring angrily at the girl who called out to Takahisa with bloodshot eyes.

"H-Hey, wait! Wait up!" She hurried after Takahisa again, grabbing his hand from behind.

"What?" Takahisa was confused. He hadn't been expecting her to call out to him again.

"You came to a place like this because you were lost, right?"

The tone of the girl was oozing with desperation, as though she was at her wits' end.

"Well, yeah," Takahisa replied vaguely. He hadn't had a destination in the first place, so he wasn't quite lost.

"And the streets around here are kind of complicated, right?"

No sooner had the girl said that, she started walking while insistently pulling his hand. Takahisa was completely bewildered by her somewhat high-handed attempts to guide him.

"H-Hey. Wait a minute, what are you doing?"

"You have no business here, no? I'm showing you the way."

When the man hiding at the corner saw the two of them leaving the red-light district, he quietly started following them. The girl led Takahisa off the main road and down a quiet street. Takahisa, who was worried about the eyes on him because he hated standing out, was mildly relieved to see there were fewer people walking about.

"H-Hey, hold on a second. Where are we going?" Takahisa shook off the girl's hand and came to a stop to question her.

The girl glanced at the entrance of the alley they'd come down to check no one was following them. She sighed in relief before answering him. "Where... You wanted to leave, didn't you?"

"That's not what I said. I never said I wanted to go home..."

"R-Really? Do you want to have some fun with me after all?" The girl's eyes widened, but she quickly took the chance to seduce Takahisa again.

"I do not. Enough of this. You don't have to show me the way, just leave me alone." Takahisa rejected her with a tired sigh, showing wariness towards the girl.

"You know, I've actually been ordered by a scary man to make you a customer no matter what. If I go back like this, he'll do terrible things to me. Can you help me out by coming to my room?"

The girl leaned against Takahisa flirtatiously and revealed her reason for seducing him so assertively. Her hand was trembling faintly, although it was unclear if it was because she was trying to appeal to his sympathy or because she was actually scared of the man who'd given her the order.

"Even if you tell me that... There are plenty of people walking around who can be your customer. It doesn't have to be me."

After saying that, Takahisa tried to pull away and leave, but the girl wouldn't let go of him so easily. She pressed his arm against her chest and

held it there tightly.

“He probably wants to make a good customer out of you because you seem to be really rich. He said the younger the woman the better, so he ordered me to go since I just so happened to be free...” she said, continuing to explain her situation.

Now that I’ve talked to him, I get it. This guy is super naive and kind. Maybe he thought he’d be an easy mark?

She thought to herself, guessing the other reasons for the order. Naive men were the easiest to win over and turn into regulars. If they were rich on top of that, then they were the best business partners for a brothel worker.

“I’ve already told you I don’t have any money.” Takahisa sighed for the umpteenth time.

“That’s a lie.” The girl didn’t believe he didn’t have money, which was only natural—the clothes Takahisa was wearing were of a truly high quality.

“I really don’t. You can even search me if you want,” Takahisa said, feeling around in his pocket with his free hand.

“Really?” The girl took a step back from Takahisa and stared at him up and down skeptically.

“Go ahead.” Takahisa lifted his arms to allow her to search freely.

“Then...” The girl touched his body and checked for a wallet. Once she realized he truly wasn’t carrying any coin, she clutched her head and sank to the ground.

“Y-You’re kidding me. You don’t have anything on you? Why don’t you have any money when you’re wearing clothes like that...?”

“Well, I’ve never needed to use money...”

“Huh? Never needed to use money?! That can’t be possible! Just what kind of life were you living?!” The girl raised her voice in strong refutation.

“Uh, well... Yeah, you’re right...” Takahisa frowned with a guilty look. He had avoided reality until now, but having no money was indeed a problem when on the run. Perhaps talking to this girl had helped him calm down a bit, allowing him to finally think clearly. However, he still intended on running from reality for as long as he could.

“Anyway, you get that I can’t be your customer now, right?” Takahisa tried to end the conversation with the girl. But...

“What should I do... How do I explain this to him?” The girl was too

busy trembling at the thought of the man who'd ordered her to listen to Takahisa's words. She looked rather pale as she worried about how to explain things to him.

"Is he that scary?"

"He is—he's the top brass in charge of the entire red-light district. Everyone calls him the young master. He's got a violent temperament and treats the brothel workers like disposable goods. If he finds out I let a super rich-looking man like you get away, he'll definitely fine me for it. This is the worst," the girl said, sighing heavily.

"I'm sorry to hear that... You should just quit a job like this," Takahisa said as a perfectly sound argument.

"Ugh..."

The girl trembled with her whole body and pouted. She then opened her mouth to say something, but—

"Ah!"

She spotted a man turn into the alley they were standing in and quickly threw herself at Takahisa, clinging to his chest.

"Huh?" Takahisa blinked in shock, unable to comprehend her actions.

"Th-This is the worst! He's here to keep an eye on me!" she whined bitterly.

"Who...?" Takahisa's back was to the entrance of the alley, so he had no idea who was coming.

"The young master!" The girl informed Takahisa who it was. "He's checking if I seduced you properly," she added, explaining why the young master had followed them into the alley. Takahisa tried to turn around and check for himself.

"S-Stop! He'll think I said something strange!"

The girl grabbed Takahisa's face and stopped him from moving. She brought her face close to him as though to kiss him. Takahisa was tall, so she had to stretch and look up at him.

"Hey..." Takahisa stiffened and reflexively tried to back away, but the girl wouldn't allow that. She wrapped her arms around his back and continued to cling to him tightly. Takahisa felt the warmth of the girl, making him freeze even more.

Then, the girl seemed to come to some kind of decision as she hugged Takahisa. She took a deep breath without removing her arms.

"Come with me," she said, entangling her arms with his.

"Huh? What? Where to?" Takahisa was utterly bewildered.

“My room,” she stated shortly.

“H-Huh?!” Takahisa’s voice-cracking shriek echoed through the alley several seconds later.

◇ ◇ ◇

Takahisa marched through the streets of the red-light district with a girl he didn’t even know the name of. They had been walking for two or three minutes.

“Here we are.” With Takahisa’s arm still clutched against her chest, the girl stopped before a building.

“Where...?” Takahisa asked nervously, glancing around at their surroundings.

The building was located on a backstreet away from the main road of the bustling red-light district. There were fewer people around than on the main road, but there were still couples walking intimately together here and there.

“This is the brothel I work at. My room is in here,” the girl said curtly.

“B-Brothel...?” In contrast, Takahisa’s voice cracked with nervousness.

“Of course. This is where I work”

Takahisa’s thoughts seemed to have come to a halt, as he looked up at the brothel without saying anything. The four-story stone building had the appearance of a high-class store.

“It’s a high-class store. It might not be as fancy as the buildings nobles live in, but it’s still impressive, no?”

“Wh-Why is there a high-class store in a backstreet...?”

“We’re high-class, so we’re on the backstreet and not the main one. The better clients prefer stores that are out of the public gaze. Now, let’s go in.”

“W-Wait...!”

“It’s fine. Keep quiet or they might get suspicious.”

Takahisa tried to protest, but the girl dragged him along by the arm. They entered the store together.

“One new customer coming in,” the girl said to the man at the counter of the store. She made quick work of the process to check him in. The receptionist at the counter stared sharply at Takahisa, who averted his gaze nervously.

“Enjoy yourself,” he said, welcoming Takahisa with a chuckle.

“This way please, dear customer. My room is on the second floor.”

The girl entwined herself around Takahisa's arm and began leading the way in an overly flirtatious tone. Her manner of speech was also different, but that was probably because the receptionist was watching.

Takahisa was taken aback.

"Come now, let's get to my room quickly."

The girl pulled Takahisa's arm and led him to the stairs. They went up to the second floor and turned into the corridor that stretched from left to right. There were around eight rooms on the second floor.

There was no one else to be seen in the silent corridor. But just like how the sound of a clock was more noticeable in a completely silent room, the faint sound of coquettish moans and creaking beds sounded exaggeratedly loud to Takahisa.

On top of that, the smell of sweet incense he'd noticed when he entered the building had grown noticeably stronger. Whether it was because the scent had an aphrodisiac effect or because it was combined with the sounds leaking from the individual rooms, one couldn't be sure.

Takahisa felt his entire body flush with heat; there was even a blush on his face that was clear to any onlooker. The softness and warmth of the girl embracing his arm was keenly felt through his clothes.

Guh...!

Miharu's pure smile flashed across Takahisa's mind. In addition to the awkwardness and shame he had suppressed until now, his guilt started boiling like magma.

"H-Hey. I'm going to go back after all." Takahisa turned around and tried to leave, but the girl wouldn't release him.

"You can't. Like I told you before we came in, I'll cover the fee. You just have to stay here until time's up."

"Why would you go as far as paying for yourself...?"

"I already told you why. The penalty for letting you escape would cost me more. I'd be better off covering you with my own money. I was doomed the moment the young master ordered me to make business with you."

"That has nothing to do with me though... And how do I know you're not trying to trick me? You could just say you won't pay once the time's up..."

"Oh, right. I could've done that."

"See! I knew it!" Takahisa tried to distance himself in a hurry, but the girl still wouldn't let go.

“If I was thinking of doing that, I wouldn’t have admitted it so easily. And I couldn’t even think of that myself, so you must be really smart,” she said, in awe of Takahisa.

Takahisa was still skeptical as he looked at the girl.

“Okay. Then as soon as we enter my room, I’ll give you the money before anything else. That should solve things, right?” the girl suggested with a sigh.

“Well... I suppose...”

Although he still had his doubts, Takahisa nodded a little less reluctantly. When the girl noticed that, she resumed dragging him by the arm.

“Come on, my room’s this way.”

And so, the two finally entered a room.

“Go ahead.” The girl unlocked the door to her room, turned on the light, and invited Takahisa inside. As soon as he stepped in, he stood still and glanced around the room restlessly.

“I’d prefer you didn’t stare so closely... This room is my room for both work and living. Is there anything strange about it?” The girl peered at the side of Takahisa’s face with a somewhat uncomfortable look.

“Oh, sorry. No, it was just bigger than I expected... It’s a nice room.”

In fact, it was a very nice room. There was easily over fifteen square meters of space, allowing a comfortable layout for a single person with limited furniture. The only things placed in the room were a double bed, wardrobe, bath bucket, and water clock to measure the time, so there was plenty of space left.

All the furniture was of good quality, and the space was neat and tidy. It seemed true that this was a high-class store. However...

“A nice room, huh...” Self-mockery with a trace of gloom showed on the girl’s face.

“Hmm?” Takahisa sensed something and observed the girl’s expression curiously. But the girl quickly turned around to face away from him.

“Like I said, this is a high-class establishment. And that makes me a high-class brothel worker—though I’m still a novice,” the girl said proudly, before walking over to the wardrobe. There was a safe inside, from which she took out a single coin.

“Here,” she said after returning to Takahisa’s side, holding out the coin.

“Huh?”

Takahisa tilted his head and looked at the dark gray coin.

“The fee for this place. One hour is one large silver. We agreed I’d give it to you as soon as we got to my room, remember?”

“R-Right...”

Takahisa finally understood why the girl was holding out the coin to him. He hesitated for a moment before reaching out to accept it, but he noticed the girl’s hand was trembling.

“What’s wrong...?”

“This large silver is about two weeks of my salary. And yet... Yet...”

It seemed the girl was reluctant about handing Takahisa the large silver coin.

“Two weeks of your salary is the fee for one customer?”

Takahisa didn’t know how many customers she had in a week, but wasn’t she being exploited if two weeks of her salary was the same as what one customer paid? That was what Takahisa was implying.

“Even if a customer pays one large silver, I don’t get even ten percent of that. The rent for this room, the cost of clothes for work, the handling fee the brothel charges, the various debts to be repaid... A lot of it gets deducted for many reasons.”

“I see...” Takahisa seemed to feel sorry for her, as he hesitated to take the coin.

“Go on, take it.” She grabbed his hand herself and placed the large silver in his palm.

“You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, I’m the one who suggested it. But a promise is a promise, so you have to stay in my room until the entire time is up.”

The girl released the hand she pushed the coin into and spoke as though she was trying to convince herself as well.

“All right.” Either way, he had nowhere to go. Takahisa nodded sluggishly.

“Ah... My precious large silver...”

The girl sighed and moved to the water clock beside the bed. She started measuring the time before returning to the wardrobe. Then, for some reason, she began to remove her dress.

“Hey! Wh-What are you—?!” Takahisa turned his back to her in a hurry.

“These clothes are tight around the chest, so I get tired wearing them. You’re a guest, not a customer—I should be allowed to feel comfortable in my own room, no?” the girl explained as she changed. She revealed her

naked body in front of Takahisa without any concern of him seeing her.

"Uh..." Takahisa gulped at the sound of rustling fabric behind him.

"You can look if you want," the girl said with a chuckle, still naked.

"I won't!" Takahisa stubbornly kept his back turned.

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“Hmm. I mean, I knew it already, but you’re a virgin after all.”

“What?!”

“Wanna lose your virginity with me?” the girl asked impishly.

“D-Don’t joke around like that!”

“Did you consider it for a moment?”

“I did not! I’ll do those kinds of things with the person I love!”

“Hmm. Right, you did say you have someone you love.”

Takahisa remembered Miharu again and bit his lip with an extremely pained look.

“How odd. You look like you’re in pain when you think of the person you love.” The girl came around Takahisa’s front, stooping over to peer up at his face.

“Wha...” Takahisa startled for a second, thinking she was naked, but the girl had finished changing already. Unlike the sexy negligee she wore earlier, the dress she wore now was more like old rags. The fabric was rough and there were permanent stains everywhere.

Takahisa, who had been exhaling in relief, did a double take at the change in the girl’s appearance and atmosphere. He looked at her with round eyes.

“Oh, did you just think I looked shabby? Nothing like a high-class brothel worker?” the girl asked, seeing through him.

“No, I wouldn’t think that...” Takahisa shook his head with a sigh.

“Really? Some of the girls buy expensive clothes and accessories with their salary, but we never get to wear them outside our rooms. There’s no one to show them off to, so I’m fine with this. I’d rather save the money and leave this place sooner,” the girl said, looking down at her clothes as she explained how she’d gotten the dress she was currently wearing for free. She seemed to be rather fond of her well-worn dress, as it was obvious her smile was genuine.

What am I doing here...?

Just two or three hours prior, he had been in the most luxurious place in this kingdom. Yet now he was in the room of a brothel neighboring the slums with a brothel girl he didn’t even know the name of. It was a bizarre situation.

Just then, the girl tugged Takahisa’s hand.

“Hey, are you just going to stay silent until time’s up? Be my conversation partner for a bit. Let’s sit down on the bed first.”

The girl sat Takahisa down on the bed, then sat herself down beside

him. They were close enough for their shoulders to touch.

"You're too close," Takahisa said, shifting aside so there was a one-person-wide space between them.

"Really? I don't mind." The girl giggled, then stared at Takahisa's face.

"What...?"

"You're really handsome, you know. We don't see your kind of facial features around here, though."

"What are you saying...?" Takahisa, who had been replying curtly out of his wariness towards the girl, blushed at the sudden compliment towards his appearance.

"I'm just telling the truth, you know? You're handsome, your clothes are fancy—you're just like a prince. You look like you would give a girl everything she wants. Yet you're cute and naive."

The girl listed off her impression of Takahisa and smiled impishly.

"I look pathetic, I know. You don't have to make fun of me." Takahisa, who was still heartbroken, furrowed his brow in a self-deprecating way.

"I don't think that at all. But for someone who's blessed in appearance, clothing, and everything else, there's something even you don't have."

"Huh?"

"Confidence. You don't have any." The girl accurately guessed what Takahisa was lacking.

"..."

"Oh, and money. I assumed you were in the red-light district to get your first time over with, but you weren't after that at all... Honestly, why were you in the red-light district?" the girl asked with a wry smile, looking at Takahisa.

"I told you already, I was lost."

"Someone dressed like you, lost alone in the red-light district? Where were you trying to go in the first place?"

How could one have so little sense of direction? The girl gave Takahisa's reaction a searching look as though to say that.

Takahisa averted his eyes and fell silent with a guilty look.

"It definitely seems like there are special circumstances going on... But whatever. Does it have anything to do with the girl you love?"

"Wh..."

"Oh, bull's-eye?"

Takahisa's face fell, transforming the girl's hunch into a conviction.

"She rejected me... She told me she hated me to my face."

The fact he was talking to a stranger seemed to make it easier for Takahisa to confide what'd happened.

"Oh my... That must have been hard for you."

As soon as the girl said that, she sat back down right next to Takahisa and hugged him.

"You're close..."

Takahisa slowly tried to stand up to distance himself from the girl.

"Do you hate it?" the girl asked, tightening her grip around him.

Takahisa neither agreed nor disagreed. He didn't try to stand up from the bed he was sitting on again either. However, he still seemed embarrassed about touching a girl he didn't know, as he turned to face away from her and leaned away too.

"Heh heh. So you can be honest about your feelings too. Come to think of it, what's your name? You still haven't told me."

The girl patted Takahisa's head gently and asked for his name.

"Takahisa..." Takahisa mumbled quietly.

"Takahisa? That's not a name you hear around these parts, but it sounds lovely."

"That's not true..."

Takahisa.

Miharu's voice calling his name must have echoed in his head, as Takahisa curtly denied the girl's compliment with a bitter look.

"Looks like quite the wound, huh? But at the very least, it's a lovely name to me. It sounds like a prince's name."

"If it's not a name you get here, why do you think prince?"

"Dunno, I wonder why?" The girl giggled and petted his head even more gently. Takahisa finally seemed to gain an interest in whom he was talking to and quietly glanced at the face of the girl hugging him. But he must have felt embarrassed, as he quickly looked away and fixed his gaze on the corner of the room instead.

"You must really be in love with that girl," the girl said with an exasperated sigh.

"Why do you say that...?"

"Because you won't make a move even when I'm hugging you like this. Am I really that unattractive?"

"That's not why... Like I said already, I'd rather do that kind of thing with the one I love."

In other words, the one Takahisa loved was not the girl sticking firmly

to his side. The one he loved was a third party who wasn't here...

"See? It makes me a little jealous. Besides..."

"Besides?"

"I asked for your name, so isn't it only polite as a man for you to ask mine?"

"Right... That's true. Sorry. What's your name?"

"It's Julia."

"Julia... Julia. Okay. I won't forget that." Takahisa spoke as though he was carefully considering her words.

"Oh? Should you be making such a declaration so lightly? You know there are countless men who've said that to brothel workers then forgotten their names anyway."

It was common to get customers who passionately whispered their love during the act, then forgot their partners' names as soon as they were done. Julia laughed teasingly, explaining that was just how men were.

"It's okay, I won't forget. I'm good at remembering the names and faces of girls."

"Oh my, and here I thought you were naive. That's quite the pompous thing to say."

Honestly, depending on the time and place, those words could have sounded quite creepy. Julia's eyes widened in surprise as she informed him of that.

"Ha ha... There was a period of time where my head was completely blank. During that time, I completely forgot the name of a girl I saw every day, even though she always treated me with so much kindness... I realized it was really rude of me, so I swore to myself I'd never forget again," Takahisa said, explaining the reason he'd decided to never forget a girl's name. Incidentally, the girl whose name he had forgotten was Lilianna. He was referring to the period of time right after he was summoned into this world.

"Pfft! You said such a lame line just to protect that overly serious vow of yours?" Julia burst out laughing.

Takahisa pouted. "So what if it's lame?"

"Right. By the way, was that girl the girl you love?" Julia asked, looking at the side of Takahisa's face.

"No, she wasn't..." Takahisa turned his face away and denied it with a guilt-ridden look. There was a brief pause before his answer during which he recalled what he had last said to Lilianna.

“You’re in love with me, aren’t you? Aren’t you saying such horrible things for the sake of your kingdom, because you don’t want me to be with Miharu?”

He had made Lilianna cry and incurred Miharu’s fury with that fatal line.

I’m the worst... Why did I say such a thing...?

His fear of being separated from Miharu again—of being alone again—had made him get emotional during their argument and run his mouth without thinking.

No... That’s not what I truly thought. Those weren’t my true feelings.

When he recalled that moment, Takahisa was tormented by a tremendous amount of guilt and regret. But it was too late now. He couldn’t take back what was already said.

Besides, shouldn’t the words he uttered at the peak of his emotions be his true feelings? Could he honestly say he had never felt Lilianna’s affection for him before? Hadn’t he faintly suspected Lilianna was in love with him all along?

Takahisa reflexively shook his head furiously.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing...”

“You poor thing. You’re trembling so much.” Julia patted his back like she was soothing a child.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, back when Takahisa and Julia had just entered the room on the second floor, a rough-looking man entered the brothel building through the entrance. He appeared to be around his early thirties.

“Young master!”

The receptionist who was easily in his forties stood up from his chair and bowed deeply in greeting.

“Hey. Julia brought a customer here just now, right?” the young master asked, cutting straight to the chase.

“Yes. He seemed like a kid from quite a rich family.”

“Was there anything strange about that kid?”

“Strange? He did seem oddly serious...and rather ignorant about the ways of the world. I assumed he snuck in here to lose his virginity...”

It wasn’t rare to get those kinds of customers. As a high-class brothel, many of the clients were nobles in hiding.

“Is that all?”

“Well, if I had to say, then I guess it was strange how he didn’t look like he was born in this country either. He was clearly an immigrant.”

“That’s right...”

“Is there something about that kid bothering you?”

“No... He was wearing quite the fancy clothes, you see. Young nobles sneaking out aren’t a novelty around here, but I’ve never seen one walking about unarmed without any guards or company. That’s why I’m curious about his background.”

The young master explained the reason for his curiosity.

“You sure his guards weren’t just hiding somewhere?”

“I thought so too, so I had some people circle the place several times.”

“As expected of the young master. Nothing gets past you.”

The receptionist expressed his awe for the young master with a shrug.

“I’ve never heard of any immigrant families in the royal capital with that much money. But it’s possible that an immigrant married rich and had a son. That, or he’s a rich kid who’s temporarily visiting the capital.”

“Incidentally, what are you planning on doing if the kid really doesn’t have any guards?”

“Nothing. No matter how serious he looked, he’s a perv that sneaked out to visit a brothel. Once he experiences a woman, he’ll become a regular here. Depending on his fetishes, he could even become an underground client. For the sake of his future patronage, we’ll let him go home feeling good about the whole thing. However...”

“However?”

“I’d like to learn a bit more about him for the sake of our future association. Be it his fetishes, background, or anything else,” the young master said suggestively, rubbing the stubble on his chin.

“Then I shall probe into it on his way out,” the receptionist offered.

“No, he’ll be a good customer to us. I’ll see to it myself.”

The young master firmly offered to deal with it himself. Either he had high hopes of Takahisa becoming a cash cow, or it had something to do with his unknown identity.

“They won’t be coming out of that room for another hour at the least. I’m going to spend that time checking the surroundings once more.”

With that, the young master temporarily left the brothel again.

◇ ◇ ◇

One hour later, the water clock in the room indicated that the allocated time was up.

“It’s about time.”

“I see...” Takahisa said quietly.

In the end, the two had sat on the bed and slowly conversed with each other for the entire hour. They hadn’t discussed anything serious, merely sharing their ages to discover they were the same age, then filling the rest of the time with small talk and trivial thoughts.

Neither Takahisa nor Julia pried into the other’s situation by asking questions. Takahisa hadn’t revealed he was a hero, and Julia hadn’t said anything personal about herself either. Prying too deeply into the other’s situation would create depth and weight to their relationship. And while that could sometimes become an opportunity, at other times, it could become a risk. Fearing that risk, they had kept their distance. But even without any prying, they had felt each other’s warmth in their embrace. That warmth must have been very comforting to Takahisa in his current state. The fact he had met someone easy to talk to, whose silences weren’t weren’t awkward to endure, had probably played a role.

“Thank you. I feel a little calmer after talking to you.” Takahisa thanked Julia with a thin smile on his face. He was still in low spirits from the mistake he had made at the castle, but he had regained some of his composure.

“Really? Good for you,” Julia replied bluntly. She then sighed dramatically. “Ugh, why do I have to pay out of my own pocket to satisfy someone else?”

She was still clinging to Takahisa, possibly to hide her face out of embarrassment.

“Sorry...” Takahisa lowered his gaze out of guilt.

“It’s not something you have to apologize for, okay?” Julia softly placed a hand on Takahisa’s shoulder and extended her arms, creating distance between them. In doing so, the scent of her sweet perfume tickled Takahisa’s nostrils.

“R-Really?” Takahisa hadn’t tried to look at Julia the whole time he was being clung to, but the scent drew his gaze towards her.

“I was the one who dragged you into my room.”

“That’s true...” Takahisa agreed with an amused chuckle.

“Besides...I should thank you.” Julia averted her strong-willed eyes and suddenly thanked him bashfully.

“Huh? What for?”

“You’re the first person to leave without doing anything but talk. It’s the first time I’ve felt like I was treated with respect in this room—the first time I had a proper conversation at all. That’s what for. I’m surprised there are men like you out there,” she said with a cute smile fitting for her age.

“I see...” Enchanted by Julia’s smile, Takahisa’s eyes widened.

“Well, it could just be you’re a loser, considering you didn’t make a move after all the clinging and seducing I did.”

“Sh-Shut up... Wait, you were seducing me?” Takahisa asked, startling with a red face.

“I did wonder when you would push me down. I was clinging to you so much, I was basically asking for it. Didn’t you notice?”

Takahisa swallowed his breath, speechless.

“Oh, are you regretting not making a move sooner?”

“I-I’m not! That’s why I didn’t push you down onto the bed!” Takahisa denied the accusation angrily, face still flushed red.

“That’s right. You didn’t.” Julia suddenly moved her hand and touched Takahisa’s cheek. She stared into his face from up close.

“Wh-What?”

“Nothing. Just getting a final look at the face of a prince.”

“I told you I’m not that important...”

“You’re in my room as a guest, so the least you could do is leave with some confidence. I’m saying I’m settling for you, so you should be proud. Got it?” Julia pinched Takahisa’s cheek and pulled it.

“O-Ow, that hurts. What are you settling for?”

“You as my prince. I’m saying you’ll do.”

“Wh—” Takahisa flinched at the glare Julia shot him from so close up.

“Well? Do you feel a little more confident?” Julia looked at Takahisa affectionately.

“Wh-What do you mean by me being your prince...?” Takahisa asked with a gulp.

“Stop right there. Time’s up.” Julia pressed the index finger of her left hand to Takahisa’s lips to force them closed. She then pointed at the door of her room with the index finger of her right hand.

“Dream time is over,” she said.

Takahisa reflexively opened his mouth to say something, but after a brief moment of hesitation, remained silent. Was it because he didn’t want to say goodbye yet? Was he reluctant to leave after he had entered the

store so unwillingly? Did he want to remain in this dream for a little longer?

"I'm sure you would've guessed this, but extending the dream will incur an extra fee. I have no intention of paying that as well, okay?" Julia said teasingly, then sighed in exasperation. That seemed to snap Takahisa back to reality, as he slowly got up from the bed with a wry smile.

"Right... That's understandable. Let's go."

"Yeah..."

Was it just his imagination, or did Julia's eyes tremble with a glimpse of sadness when she nodded just now? At any rate, the two left the room. They walked down the corridor and descended the staircase.

"Yo, I'm back." A man was just walking through the front door.

"Ugh, it's the young master..." Julia whispered just loud enough for Takahisa to hear.

The young master...

Takahisa looked over at the man who'd entered the building.

"Welcome back, young master. Our guest was just on his way out."

The man at the reception bowed his head at the young master and looked over at Takahisa and Julia, who had just reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm back. My business can wait; make sure you tend to our guest first." The young master shrugged, made his way to a corner of the lobby, and leaned against the wall.

This person...

Takahisa stole a glance at the young master. According to Julia, the man they called the young master was one of the leaders of the organization that managed this area of the red-light district. Takahisa swallowed nervously at the realization the man was probably from the equivalent of the mafia or yakuza on Earth.

"What is that outfit, Julia?" the receptionist asked, staring at Julia's clothes. The brothel had rules about stipulated outfits, but Julia was wearing the ragged dress she normally wore off the clock. However...

"This was the customer's request. He said he prefers his girls in shabby outfits."

The exception was if it was a customer's request. With her arm linked with Takahisa's, Julia looked up at his face and smiled mischievously.

"I see." With a vulgar smirk, the receptionist gave Takahisa a look of understanding. The young master had a similar smirk of delight on his

face.

"Ha ha..."

The corners of Takahisa's eyes crinkled as he laughed awkwardly.

"Now, the customer is leaving," Julia said, asserting dominance.

"I shall run the bill, then. For the standard fee with no extensions or bonuses, your total will come to one large silver."

Tch. He doesn't look like the type to go over the top on his first time, but Julia should have been able to wring more out of him...

One large silver. When the young master heard Takahisa's total, he clicked his tongue in his mind. As Julia had explained to Takahisa in advance, one large silver was the base rate for this brothel. Wealthier clients would spend several times this amount on extensions, ordering food and drink, and extra requests.

"Here." Takahisa placed the dull silver coin he'd received from Julia down on the counter.

"The total has been received." The receptionist side-eyed the young master for his reaction as he picked up the coin.

"Well, then..." Julia said, pulling Takahisa through the lobby by the arm.

"How was it, kid? Did our Julia manage to satisfy you?" the young master said at the same time, speaking over her loudly.

"Huh...? Um, yes. She was very nice." Takahisa blinked in surprise before answering falteringly.

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear that. If you have any special requests, feel free to make them on your next visit. Our establishment will do whatever it takes to satisfy the customer as long as the right price is met. We could make this one even shabbier, if you so wished," the young master said with a vulgar grin, watching Takahisa for his reaction.

"Wha..." Takahisa was rendered speechless by how far those words were from his own common sense and sensitivities.

"I'm going to escort our customer outside now," Julia said with a quiet sigh, ending their conversation there. She proceeded to drag Takahisa by the arm.

"Huh? Ah, yeah. Okay. Let's go..." Takahisa snapped back to his senses and went with Julia.

"We look forward to your business again," the young master said to Takahisa without breaking his customer service smile.

Tch. That damn Julia...

Angered by how Julia had interrupted their conversation, he glared at her back as she walked to the door. However, he didn't call for her to stop, and the two left the brothel. Outside, the sun was completely set, making the time way past evening.

"This is goodbye, then." As soon as they stepped outside, Julia released Takahisa's arm.

"Right... Goodbye..." Takahisa nodded reluctantly. He hesitated over whether to just turn away.

"Hey, Takahisa." Julia grabbed both of Takahisa's hands with a look of determination.

"Huh?" Takahisa flinched.

"Do you remember what you said about how you wanted to do those kinds of things with the person you love?"

"Y-Yeah, I do." Takahisa tilted his head for a brief moment, wondering when he'd said that, but he quickly remembered. They were the words he'd used to brush Julia aside each time she tried to seduce him.

"I agree with that. I'm not that easy of a woman, you know? If I had a choice, I would only do those kinds of things with the person I loved—or at least someone I liked. If it weren't for my job, I would never try to seduce others."

For some reason, Julia started confiding in him about her sense of virtue.

"Right... Yeah. I get it."

Takahisa had been wide-eyed at the sudden confession, but he nodded happily at how they shared the same values.

"That reaction tells me you don't get it." Julia sighed tiredly.

"Hm? What don't I get?"

"I seduced you, didn't I? I even paid myself to bring you into my room. Do you know what that means?" she asked, looking up at him flirtatiously.

"Huh? Oh..."

Julia brought her face close to Takahisa's ear. "I thought you were kind of nice. Do you get what I'm saying?" she whispered.

"Uh..." Takahisa looked down with a blush and froze. Julia grabbed Takahisa by the shoulders and forced him to turn away from her.

"Okay. Now go. Don't come back to a place like this ever again. If you go straight forward from here, you'll exit the red-light district."

She slapped him on the back and urged him forward.

"H-Hey..." Takahisa immediately turned back to her.

“Bye-bye.” Julia waved insistently, a hint of sadness in her smile as she expressed her intent to part ways.

“Yeah... See you later.” Takahisa nodded after a long pause, then bid his farewell as though they would see each other again.

“Later...” Julia’s eyes widened before she replied with a happy smile. Thus, Takahisa finally put the brothel behind him. But after walking less than ten meters, he was struck with the urge to turn around. However, if he lingered around any longer, he would only cause more trouble for Julia.

What should I do...

While facing forward, Takahisa thought about what he would do from here. Thanks to Julia, he was a lot calmer than when he’d left the castle before. Which was why...

I don’t want to return to the castle, but...

Realistically speaking, he had no other choice but to return. After all, he didn’t have a single coin on him. At this rate, he wouldn’t even have a place to sleep for the night, much less a means to secure food or drink.

But that didn’t mean he was about to return to the Galarc Castle. He could foresee the huge scolding he would get for leaving the castle if he went back. Knowing that it would also lead to his forced deportation to the Centostella Kingdom made the thought all the more depressing.

I just...

Just what? What did he want to do? What could he do that he would be content with?

The first thing that came to mind was, of course—

Miharu... Miharu...

The empty space in his heart that was created by not having Miharu by his side.

“Ugh...”

Takahisa gritted his teeth and grimaced, tears threatening to spill at any moment as he thought about being rejected by Miharu.

He wanted salvation. Salvation that could fill this hole in his heart... The next person to come to mind after Miharu was Julia, whom he had just bidden farewell to.

It was strange. He had only met her today, only spoken to her properly for one hour, yet there was a part of him that sought her.

Just one last time...

That’s right, shouldn’t it be fine to turn around just one last time? If he saw her face one last time, he’d be able to do his best a little longer.

With that thought, Takahisa turned around.

“Huh...?”

He was met with the sight of the young master grabbing Julia by the hair and dragging her into the alley beside the brothel. Takahisa froze for a long moment in doubt of what he saw.

◇ ◇ ◇

Just a few moments earlier, while Takahisa and Julia were bidding each other farewell before the brothel, the young master observed them from the shadows of the brothel entrance.

He couldn’t hear what the two were saying, but he could tell from their expressions that the two were happy in each other’s presence. He could tell Julia had a firm hold of Takahisa’s heart.

That kid’s completely head over heels for Julia. Yet that stupid woman...

Displeased with something, the young master clicked his tongue with a frown. His sour mood was clear just by looking at his back.

“Scary...”

It made the man at the reception counter tremble. In the meantime, Takahisa finished bidding farewell to Julia and began to walk out of the red-light district.

Julia watched Takahisa leave without saying anything. The young master glared at the reluctant look on her face.

Don’t tell me that woman...

His eyes widened, sensing something.

Hmm, perfect. Time to put on a performance and teach Julia a lesson.

With a smirk on his face, the young master left the brothel. He approached Julia without a word, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and yanked.

“Wha...?”

Julia was stunned. Her world was suddenly shaking, and she had no idea what had happened. The pain that came after a delay made her realize she was being pulled by the hair.

“H-Hey, that hurts! Stop! What are you doing?!”

Julia protested against the young master with a sharp glare.

“What am I doing? I’m punishing you, you stupid woman. Now come. The customers could see us here.”

With Julia’s hair grasped in his fist, the young master started walking towards the alley beside the brothel. In the distance, Takahisa had just

turned around. He watched on as the young master walked into the alley with Julia in tow and froze in shock.

“Ah...” Julia made eye contact with Takahisa. When she realized Takahisa had witnessed her current situation, she paled and averted her gaze.

“Hmph.” The young master smirked. As soon as he entered the alleyway, he released Julia’s hair and threw her to the ground.

“Gah! Ugh...” Julia rolled across the ground. She immediately tried to use her hands to push herself back to her feet, but the young master approached her and grabbed another fistful of her hair.

“Hey, Julia. You got that kid to fall for you pretty hard, didn’t you?” The young master crouched down and leered at her. Julia glared back at him.

“S-So what if I did? That shouldn’t be a problem!”

“There’s a big problem—you. What do you mean you only earned one large silver from an ignorant rich kid head over heels for you? You could’ve squeezed him for more!”

“H-He was so ignorant, he didn’t know how to use his money.”

“That’s wrong. If he doesn’t know how to use his money, then it’s your job to teach him. A single large silver is barely anything. Stupid woman.”

“H-Huh?! A large silver is two whole weeks of constant work for me. It’s plenty of money!” Julia argued, her voice brimming with emotion.

“Huh? Your pitiful income is because of the debt your parents left you. Do you realize how much money went into training you to be a high-class whore? What’s wrong with trying to get back the money I spent on you? You should be grateful we trained your talent. It’s your job to dedicate yourself to the brothel and earn money from the customers. Am I wrong? Huh?”

The young master criticized Julia with a rapid succession of questions and yanked her hair harder.

“I-It hurts. Let go...” Julia struggled to turn her face away. Her earlier spirit was completely crushed by fear.

“Hey, look at me!” The young master forced Julia to meet his eyes by pulling her by the hair.

“Eek...”

“You got in my way when I tried to question the kid, didn’t you?” he asked with a sneer.

“H-Huh? What do you mean?”

“You’re stuttering. Did you think I wouldn’t notice? You took him out of the brothel as quickly as you could because you didn’t want me to talk to him.”

“Wh-Why would I do that?” Julia asked, voice cracking.

“I’m the one asking you. My guess is that it has something to do with the reason you didn’t wring that boy for all the money you could. How devoted of you, hmm?” the young master asked as though he could see through her, sneer widening.

“What?! I-I have no idea what you’re on about!”

“Don’t tell me you fell for that noble kid... Or did you get your hopes up thinking that ignorant boy would redeem you? Which is it, huh?”

Julia cowered with her gaze fixed on the floor.

“You wore those ragged clothes so he’d pity you, didn’t you? Did you think he’d be more likely to redeem you if you showed him your shabby side?”

“N-No!”

Unable to endure the young master’s wicked conjectures, Julia raised her head and denied them. But just then...

“H-Hey, what are you doing?! Please stop that!” Takahisa had entered the alleyway and called out to the young master’s back.

“Oh? If it isn’t the boy from earlier.” The young master’s mouth curled upwards in satisfaction. He released Julia’s hair and stood up, then spread his arms as though to welcome Takahisa.

“T-Takahisa... Why did you come back...?” Julia’s expression was telling him he shouldn’t have done so.

“Oh, so the kid is named Takahisa? That’s a unique name.”

“What are you doing? I heard Julia scream.”

“As a brothel owner, I’m merely disciplining my worker,” the young master said, grabbing Julia’s hair once more and lifting it to show Takahisa.

Julia’s face twisted in pain. “Ah...!”

“Stop it!” Takahisa yelled in alarm.

“Stop it? But why?” Without releasing Julia’s hair, the young master tilted his head in question.

“Wh-What do you mean, why...? Julia’s clearly in pain!”

“That’s because it wouldn’t be discipline if it didn’t hurt, no? Besides, it’s her fault she took a rebellious attitude against me. I have to discipline her to put her in her place.”

The young master sneered defiantly, knowing he had no reason to be criticized.

“J-Just because you’re her employer doesn’t mean you can do that! Violence is a crime! Use your words, not your actions!”

“Pfft! Ha ha, ha ha ha! Crime? Use my words?” Hearing Takahisa’s words made the young master burst into loud laughter.

“Wh-What’s so funny?”

“Pardon me, I just couldn’t believe you’d say something so off the mark... Listen here, kid. This woman is a slave. The collar around her neck is proof of that. Weren’t you aware of that?”

“Huh...?” Takahisa was stunned to hear Julia was a slave.

“This woman’s parents took out an enormous loan, so she became a slave to pay it off. The brothel owns the rights to this woman. Although there are some laws that protect slaves, this much discipline isn’t considered a problem. That’s why there’s no crime going on here.” The young master released Julia’s hair roughly.

“Guh...” Julia fell to the ground heavily.

“Stop it!” Takahisa roared angrily.

“Oh, how scary. Hey Julia, the kid’s mad at me because of you. What are you gonna do about it, huh?”

The young master made a show of kicking Julia while she was down.

“Ugh...”

“I said stop it!” Takahisa’s emotions took control of him as he marched towards the young master.

“Whoa there. That look on your face is no joke.” The young master drew the dagger he kept at his waist for self-defense and pointed it warningly at Takahisa.

“Wha...” Takahisa faltered at the weapon and stopped with a gasp. The young master quickly sheathed his dagger again.

“Now kid, I understand getting heated over the first woman you sleep with, but this brothel worker doesn’t belong to you. Got it?”

“I know that much! That goes without saying!”

“You don’t, which is why you’re losing your composure right now. No?”

“You’re wrong. I’m just telling you to stop being violent with Julia...!”

“And I’m saying you have no right to be ordering me around. This slave belongs to our brothel. We operate completely within the law, you know? As long as she completes her work, I won’t hurt her without

reason.”

The young master put a little more strength into the foot he was using to step on Julia. Takahisa was trembling from head to toe as he glared angrily.

“Good grief. Are you that devoted to Julia?” the young master said with a smug sigh, finally moving his foot off Julia. “Then how about this—why don’t you become her master instead?” he asked Takahisa.

“Huh...?” Takahisa looked at him in confusion, unable to understand the purpose of the question.

“You can redeem her. I’ll give her to you for three hundred gold.” The young master suddenly started talking business by bringing up a price tag for Julia.

“Three hundred...gold...?”

It was an amount even a noble would hesitate to pay, but Takahisa didn’t show much surprise. Part of the reason was because he didn’t know the market price of redemption, but he also had no idea how much three hundred gold coins were worth. He could only tell that it was a large number—which was why the young master believed he could make a sale if he pushed a little harder.

“D-Don’t listen to him, Takahisa. Forget about me and go...!” Julia tried to put a stop to the business talk in a panic.

“Shut up. Objects have no right to speak. I’m talking to the kid right now.” The young master stepped down on Julia again.

“Ow...!”

“Stop it!” Takahisa yelled angrily once more.

“All you have to do is become her master. Then she’ll become yours. No one else will be allowed to touch her.”

“P-People aren’t objects!”

“People aren’t, yes. But a slave isn’t a person.”

“What...?!” Takahisa was lost for words.

“You like to make yourself sound good, but you paid money to buy this brothel worker too, no? Just like buying bread to satisfy your hunger. What’s the difference?”

The young master looked like he was truly confused with why it was wrong to buy a brothel worker to fulfill one’s desires.

“I-It’s not... It’s not the same at all. There’s no point talking to you. In the first place, I...!”

He hadn’t bought Julia. He had only gone to her room because she’d

asked him to. The one who had paid was Julia herself—these were the words on the tip of Takahisa's tongue, but he swallowed them when he imagined Julia being punished if he said them.

"Be honest with yourself, kid. You may fancy yourself earnest and upright, but at the end of the day, you snuck out to visit a brothel. You've got desires you're holding back from those around you, don't you? If you admit your desires honestly, I'll prepare exactly what you want."

The young master drew close to Takahisa and threw an arm around his shoulders, leaning in to whisper tempting words into his ear.

"I don't have any such thing!" Takahisa reflexively tried to brush the young master's arm away, but the young master held on firmly with his large body and muscular arm.

"Just between you and me, I've had the opportunity to assist a number of rich men like you before. Our organization runs most of the red-light district, after all. If you leave things to me, there'll be no limit to what you can do in the red-light district. Of course, it won't come free—but you could even use this woman however you wanted." The young master dragged Julia before Takahisa.

"I wouldn't do such a thing! Julia is a person, not an object!" Takahisa said with a frown.

"Come on, kid. If you're going to enjoy yourself in a brothel, you have to learn not to trust the words of the workers. Their job is to show men a dream. In order to do that, they'll say whatever they need, to whomever they need, without batting an eye. I don't know what this one said to you today, but none of it is what she truly thinks." With his arm still around Takahisa's shoulder, the young master sighed.

"Y-You're lying!" Takahisa argued, body trembling with anger.

"I'm not. I'm giving you this advice with your well-being in mind, kid. Every sweet word she whispered in your ear today was a lie to make you like her. She was hoping you'd visit the brothel again, and possibly even pay off her debt for her."

"You're wrong. She would never do that!"

"I see you've fallen quite hard for Julia. I suppose that means she has done well as a brothel worker, but...if you're so insistent about it, you may as well redeem her for three hundred gold coins, no?" the young master said, suddenly returning to the topic of her debt.

"Wha...?" Ignoring how taken aback Takahisa was, the young master grinned.

“Hey, show him your face, Julia. You should be begging your beloved Takahisa for this yourself. Be the shabby woman he wants and ask him to redeem you. Today could be your last day as a brothel worker, you know?” he said, urging Julia to speak.

“Eek...” Julia flinched and trembled. She raised her head fearfully and met Takahisa’s eyes, but she closed her mouth without saying what she was going to say. “Ah... Uh...”

“Ha ha ha! Look how terrified she is. Maybe she thinks you won’t buy her if she pleads the wrong way. Well? Doesn’t it arouse you? You like them shabby, don’t you?” the young master asked with an amused smirk.

“Sh-Shut up!”

Takahisa used his strength and forcefully shook the young master’s arm off him. In doing so, he lightly shoved the young master away.

“Tch, that hurts... And here I was humbling myself. How annoying.” The young master clicked his tongue with a displeased frown. Takahisa flinched, taking a small step back. The young master saw that and snorted.

“Oh well. Hey Julia, the kid says you’re not worth three hundred to him,” he said to Julia in an exaggerated tone.

Julia hung her head weakly, completely defeated.

“Th-That’s not true! I just don’t have that much on me right now!”

“I’m not asking you to pay on the spot. You can go and fetch the money, you know?”

“Th-That’s...”

Takahisa awkwardly fell silent. Even if he left, he didn’t have three hundred gold coins either way. Lilianna might have paid for him if he asked, but what right did he have to ask her that now? Would she even pay for him anymore?

“Well, that’s only natural. I wouldn’t buy this woman for that much either, and I’ve never heard of a man crazy enough to buy the first woman he meets in a brothel. But if you like Julia that much, you’re free to come back and play again. Now stand, Julia.”

The young master seemed to have determined that Takahisa had no intention of paying up. His attitude suddenly turned blunt and he picked Julia up from the ground, forcing her to stand.

Although Julia got to her feet, she made no attempt to look at Takahisa. She kept her gaze fixed downwards as though she was avoiding looking directly at a harsh reality.

“Do you understand now, Julia? No one redeems a brothel worker so

easily. There's no prince who will come to save you. You're showing men dreams, not dreaming for yourself."

The young master made a show of drawing Julia into his arms and speaking to her in an encouraging tone. He started to lead the two of them out of the alleyway.

"Ah..." Takahisa weakly tried to reach for Julia. Was this really okay? Could he really leave her like this? What would happen if he let Julia leave like this?

"Now, how about I comfort you in the kid's place tonight? I'll pay you the full large silver too, since that's how much you're really worth," the young master said, disparaging Julia further to devastate her while she was down.

"Grr...!" Takahisa lost his cool and impulsively started marching forward. He shoved the young master with force and pulled Julia into his arms.

"Whoa!" The young master stumbled forward.

"T-Takahisa...?" Julia looked up at Takahisa's face in a daze.

"Hah... Hah..." Takahisa was breathing heavily, as though he was overly excited.

"Hey, that one actually hurt a lot. No joke."

The young master was completely enraged. He drew his dagger from the sheath at his waist and pointed it at Takahisa with a glare. This time, it was no longer an intimidation tactic—he was very much on the verge of attacking.

Takahisa faltered slightly, but that was only for a brief moment. He moved Julia behind himself to create distance between them, then prepared himself to face the young master.

"You're an ignorant fool for visiting the red-light district unarmed and without a single guard. Did you think you'd be spared for being a noble? No one will know if you disappear here, you know?" the young master said sharply, marching straight towards Takahisa in long strides.

"Please stop. I don't want to fight!" Takahisa glared back and tried to stop him with his words.

"You're the one who picked the fight first!" The young master aimed a strong kick at Takahisa's abdomen. Takahisa gasped and leaped to the side to avoid the kick, but the young master followed him.

"W-Wait! Please wait, young master!" Julia grabbed the young master's shoulder in a panic, trying to stop him before things got worse.

“Shut up!” It was too little, too late. The young master swung his arm violently, shaking Julia off.

“Ow!” Julia fell backwards and landed on her backside. She immediately tried to get back up, but she appeared to have twisted her right wrist painfully when she fell.

“J-Julia!” Flames of rage blazed in Takahisa’s eyes. He clenched his fists and tried to surrender himself to the struggle with his emotions. However, whether it was because he wasn’t used to fighting or because of his strong aversion to violence, there was a glimpse of hesitation in him.

“Hey, what’s wrong?!”

The young master seemed to be experienced with starting fights more often than not, as he showed no reluctance to act violently towards another person. There was no hesitation in his movements as he swung his dagger, throwing out punches and kicks like he was truly familiar with fighting.

However, Takahisa had a certain advantage as well—the fact his physical body was enhanced by his Divine Arms. He darted about swiftly and frantically, avoiding all the young master’s attacks.

“Argh, this damn brat! Is dodging all you can do?!”

“Hah, hah...”

The red-light district was a world where the authority and status of a hero had no power; Takahisa was fighting for his life for the first time ever. Perhaps that was why his breath was so heavy even though his body was enhanced, and why he was gradually being pushed back into the end of the blind alley.

“Huh?!” Takahisa ran into a bump on the unlevel ground and fell backwards. His loss of balance created a large opening.

“Hah!” The young master smiled and took the chance to charge at Takahisa. He braced the dagger in his right hand dramatically.

Am I going to die?

Those were the words that flashed through Takahisa’s mind. The blood drained from his face, fear belatedly replacing his emotions.

N-No! I don’t want to!

Takahisa’s instincts stirred his body into action. In order to stop the young master’s approach, he held his hands in front of him like he was bracing a sword. At the same time, light gathered in his palms and transformed into a divine-looking sword with a reddish glow to its blade: it was Takahisa’s Divine Arms.

At that moment, there was less than two meters’ distance between him

and the young master. From the young master's point of view, the tip of a sword had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, creating a wicked and lethal trap.

"Wha?!"

The young master's eyes widened, but it was too late for him to react. Unable to stop his body from moving forward, he impaled himself on the sword Takahisa held before him. As a result, a blunt and heavy impact shook Takahisa's arms.

"Ah..." Takahisa recoiled in horror, letting out a cry as though he had been crushed.

"Huh?"

The young master stopped moving and looked down at his abdomen. The Divine Arms sword Takahisa clutched in both hands was mercilessly pierced through the man's chest, exactly where his heart was.

"Gah..." Takahisa's face twitched with fear as he reflexively backed away. Naturally, the sword in his hands went with him, sliding out of the young master's body.

"Urgh..." He let out a pained groan.

"Ah..." Realizing he had essentially made a follow-up attack, Takahisa came to a reflexive stop instead. But blood was already traveling from the wound and down the blade, dripping onto the floor.

"A-Ah..." With the sword still in his hands, Takahisa began trembling.

"Y-You..." The young master glared harshly at Takahisa.

Julia's legs had given out from under her in shock. She sat and stared in a daze.

Drip, drip. The sound of spilling blood didn't stop. A red puddle accumulated at the end of the blind alley.

"Aaah..." Takahisa looked between the Divine Arms in his hands, the puddle of blood on the ground, and the young master's chest, wracking his head for a way to undo what had just happened.

"I-It's no good..."

Indeed—it was completely hopeless. Murder was the only thing that was absolutely out of the question, yet...

"U-Urgh..."

It was too late; the young master threw up a large amount of blood. His eyes were unable to hold their hateful gaze on Takahisa.

"Eek...!" The brief eye contact made Takahisa scream. At the same time, he pulled away from the dying man as though to flee. This time,

Takahisa's sword slipped completely free of his body.

"Ugh..." The young master fell heavily to the ground. Blood poured out of his wound, causing the puddle at Takahisa's feet to grow.

The young master became a silent corpse. He had died so simply and abruptly, it almost seemed like a lie. The Divine Arms in Takahisa's hands eventually disappeared.

Thus, Sendo Takahisa became a murderer.

Although he had lost all memories of Rio, Takahisa had once cursed him for murdering in the past. He had stronger feelings towards murder than the average person, yet he had killed someone.

"Ah... Aaah..."

Takahisa looked down at the young master's unmoving corpse in terror, until—

"Takahisa!"

The one who snapped back to their senses first was Julia. She endured the pain in her sprained right hand, stood up, hurried over to Takahisa, and grabbed him by the hand.

"Eh...?" Takahisa's face was as pale as a ghost as it distorted with fear. He could only give a half-hearted reply when Julia grabbed his hand.

"This way! Quick!" She pulled his hand and ran away from the alley. She first poked her head out of the alley and checked for any witnesses.

"Guh... Hold on a minute. I'll be right back!"

After hesitating with a fiercely conflicted look, she hurried inside the brothel for some reason. The next moment, a strong downpour started falling.

Unable to shake off the shock of killing someone, Takahisa stood in the rain in a daze. Less than a minute later, Julia burst out of the brothel.

"Let's go, we have to run!"

She grabbed his hand and started running down the backstreets of the red-light district like a fleeing hare.

"H-Hey Julia! Why are you in such a rush?! Where did the young master go?! H-Huh... Is that the kid from before?" The receptionist of the brothel came outside in time to witness Takahisa's fleeing back as Julia dragged him away.

Chapter 4: Search

Several hours later, night had fully set, and the red-light district was at its bustling peak of activity.

In the blind alley beside the brothel where Takahisa had murdered the young master, a group of twenty-odd rough-looking men were solemnly gathered. The young master's corpse was still lying on the ground, but the rain was falling so heavily, the puddle of blood beneath him had washed away.

The group of men all paid no heed to the rain falling on them as they looked down at the young master's corpse with looks of clear grief. Then, they looked at the single man they had surrounded.

The man was the receptionist of the brothel Julia worked at. He was also the man who had first discovered the young master's corpse. It had taken him roughly half an hour to find the young master's body, upon which he had hurriedly informed the appropriate higher-ups. That was what had led to this gathering of men, but...

The receptionist was pale and trembling as he prostrated himself on the ground. He had just finished reporting what had happened to the man in his midforties before him, who was standing with a terrifyingly angry look on his face. As soon as he finished listening to the details the receptionist gave him, the man in his midforties opened his mouth.

"So..." he began slowly. Everyone immediately shuddered as though the air had gotten colder.

"In short, you were watching the store when Sammy went outside to educate Julia. She then came back alone and ran up to the second floor, then ran back down and rushed out of the store."

"Sammy" was the name of the young master; the man in his midforties gave the summary of the receptionist's report himself.

"Y-Yes, Mr. Norman!" The receptionist nodded through his trembling disposition.

"You found that strange and left the brothel to question Julia, only to see her running away with an immigrant kid who wore noble-like clothes. That kid was Julia's customer just moments prior. Is that right?"

"That is exactly right!"

“Hmm. I see. You may raise your head,” Norman said, ordering the receptionist around in a voice devoid of emotion.

“Y-Yes sir... Gah!”

The receptionist tried to raise his head gratefully, only to be met with the sight of Norman’s shoe swinging at his mouth. Blood and teeth splattered across the ground. The receptionist was knocked back from his kneeling position, falling onto his back.

“Wha?!” The receptionist held his mouth as he fell back heavily onto the wet ground. Blood rushed from his mouth.

“Are you kidding me? What do you mean you returned to your post after you saw Julia leave? You were just standing in the store like a fool while Sammy was dead?”

Norman looked down at the writhing man with bloodshot eyes.

“I-I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” the receptionist slurred, slamming his head against the ground over and over again in apology.

“You being sorry won’t bring Sammy back to life!” Norman yelled, aiming a kick at the receptionist’s shoulder.

“Gah!” The receptionist flew back once more and writhed on the ground.

“Am I wrong, huh? What will you do now? What will you do about this? Sammy was my one and only nephew, you know? And now that precious nephew of mine is dead. How will you atone for this, hmm? Let’s hear your excuse. Go on.”

Norman stepped down on the receptionist’s leg, grinding it into the ground.

“Aaah! The rain! The rain was falling! So I thought the young master was done with Julia’s punishment! I thought he went to check on the other brothels! There were customers in the store so I couldn’t leave the front counter! I’m sorry!” The receptionist was so terrified of Norman’s irrational violence, he desperately pleaded in an incomprehensible way.

“Ah, it’s such a shame...” Norman stepped down on the receptionist’s leg until the bone was fractured, then began to stomp on the fracture like he was tapping his foot impatiently.

“Aah! Aah! Aaah!” The receptionist tried to escape by crawling away, but the men around Norman didn’t allow that. Several men pinned the receptionist’s torso to the ground. However, they all avoided looking at his face as though they were pitying him.

“Phew!” Norman took a deep breath and stopped moving his foot. He

then fixed his gaze on a certain man. “Hey Nick, what do you make of this?” he asked.

“Let’s see...” Nick crouched down by the young master’s corpse and studied it.

After some time, he slowly stood up and offered his opinion. “I can’t say much without any proof, but this wound was definitely made by a sword. The tip was plunged in from the front without any resistance. It would’ve been a single strike. Normally, that brothel worker named Julia and the brat she disappeared with would be the most suspicious. The fact they’ve gone missing implies they have something to be guilty of.”

“So you think the same...”

“However...”

“What is it?”

“That immigrant brat who was dressed in high-quality noble clothes... He visited the brothel completely unarmed, right? That’s what bothers me.”

“Huh? Are you saying there’s another suspect?”

“Perhaps so... I mean, it’s possible the receptionist could be lying,” Nick said, looking down at the man crawling on the ground.

“Eek! I-I’m not! I’m not lying! Neither of them were holding a sword when they were running away either!”

The man who had been enduring his pain through his groans realized they were suspecting him and desperately began to yell.

“Hey! You better be telling the truth, got it?! You’ll regret it if you lie!” Norman said threateningly, landing another kick to go with his question. But what more was there to regret after being beaten up this much?

“Wha?! I-It’s true, it’s the truth! The young master himself checked that the brat was unarmed and alone with no guards!”

The receptionist was completely curled up in pain and fear. He definitely didn’t look like he was lying. It would take someone with serious guts to lie in a situation like this.

“Calm down, Mr. Norman. This guy is our only witness, so go easy on him. Besides, he might not be lying; maybe the brat was actually armed without appearing so,” Nick said, casually placing his hand on Norman’s shoulder. Although Norman had a higher status than him, Nick showed no fear before his fury.

For some reason, Nick possessed a sharp air to him. Like the ruffians

around him, he was well-versed in fights, but he had the intimidating aura of a warrior that had made a living from war, not violence. He wore a simple, bland-colored coat with a sharp sword at his waist, and looked more like a mercenary or adventurer than a thug.

"Hah? What do you mean?" Norman also paid proper attention to Nick's words.

"If that brat is truly a noble, he might have access to some preposterous artifacts. Like an invisible sword or something."

"So that brat is suspicious after all."

"Indeed so," Nick agreed.

I've heard of the heroes, who possess Divine Arms they can summon at will too. An immigrant brat in noble clothing with an invisible sword... Could it be?

He narrowed his eyes at the young master's corpse while pondering the mystery of the murder weapon.

"At any rate, we'll find that immigrant kid and kill him no matter what. I'll do it with my own hands... You all better not think you'll be getting any sleep tonight. Find the two who disappeared," Norman ordered the thugs around him, shaking with anger and frustration himself.

"Yes sir!"

The thugs shrank back and mustered their voices to yell their reply. The men gathered in the blind alley were members of an illegal organization based in the red-light district and slums of the Galarc Kingdom capital. That organization had just decided to put all their efforts into locating Takahisa.

"Nick."

"Yes?"

"I'd like you to find out more about the brat's background. If the brat comes from an immigrant family, there shouldn't be too many candidates."

"I'm a mercenary. I wasn't born in this land either. Shouldn't there be more suitable people for the job?" Nick asked with a shrug.

"You can use the younger ones in our group however you want. There's no one better for the job," Norman said, entrusting the job to him.

"Fine. Give me one night. I'll sneak into the noble district and see if anything's changed. Any accomplices will just get in my way, so I'll go alone."

"I'm counting on you. I'll get the others to search everywhere else."

"Got it. I'll be off, then."

As soon as he said that, Nick walked off.

I thought a mission like intelligence gathering in the capital would be boring, but if that kid is really a hero, things are about to get fun. But with how big this matter is, I better report it to Mr. Reiss quickly.

With his back to the organization members, Nick smiled and disappeared into the night.

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On the west side of the royal capital, over a kilometer away from the red-light district in the south and around the time Norman and his men noticed the young master's death, a young couple ran through the pouring rain and into an inn. The two wore hooded cloaks and were completely drenched.

"Welcome." The man at the counter of the inn greeted them in an unmotivated voice.

"A room for two, please," one of the customers said simply. Her face was covered by her hood and pointed downwards, but her voice was clearly feminine.

"That'll be four large bronze for two. Meals are five small bronze per person."

"No meals for now," the girl said, placing four large bronze coins on the counter.

"Use the room up the stairs and at the end of the left corridor." The man held out their room key and glanced over at the other customer.

The other customer stood in unmoving silence with his face pointed down. His hood was hiding his face as well, but he had the stature of a man. The glimpse of his nose and mouth through the gaps revealed that he was a young man, and that the color of his skin was as pale as a ghost...

"Let's go."

The girl took the key and started walking. The boy said nothing as he dragged his legs like a puppet. The girl led the way up the stairs, reminding him to watch his feet, but he remained silent.

What creepy guests, the man at the counter thought, immediately looking away in disinterest.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Come inside."

The girl took the boy's hand and dragged him into the room on the second floor. She then stuck her head out the door and checked no one had followed them into the inn before finally closing the door.

"I think we'll be okay for tonight," she said, removing her hood. The face that was revealed was Julia's. She sighed in relief and removed her cloak.

"Take off your cloak too, Takahisa," she said, helping him remove his cloak. Takahisa allowed her to move him about without any resistance. The cloak was waterproof, so he hadn't lost any body temperature, yet he was trembling from head to toe. When his hands that had been hidden by the cloak were freed from the fabric—

"Huh?!" Fear suddenly filled Takahisa's face. It clearly had something to do with how he had killed the young master a mere hour ago.

Thump. The dull impact of the young master's chest being pierced still weighed heavily on Takahisa's arms.

"It's okay, it'll be okay, Takahisa. Let's sit down."

Julia hugged Takahisa tightly. She patted his back like she was soothing a child and sat down on the bed beside him.

"I... I..." Takahisa hung his head, guilt smeared across his face. His gaze was still fixed on his trembling hands. "What should I do? I..."

He killed a man. He was a murderer. The words looped in his head.

"You saved me. That's why you're not a bad person, Takahisa. They shouldn't be able to find us here for a while."

Julia softly wrapped her arms around him from the side. Incidentally, the two were only able to hide themselves in the inn like this thanks to her. Right before fleeing the scene of the crime, Julia had risked everything by returning to the brothel and retrieving the money they needed to flee from her room.

Thanks to that, they were able to buy cheap coats from a street stall and hide Takahisa's conspicuous appearance before running into an inn. They'd been able to run around in the rain with these coats before arriving at this inn, so there was no way anyone could locate them here unless they had been following them the entire time.

Takahisa continued trembling despite Julia's embrace. Although he had been spurred on by Rio being his rival in love, he had always felt a strong aversion to killing people in this world where lives could easily be taken. There was no way he could break out of the shock of his first murder so easily.

“Mmmph?!”

The next moment, life returned to Takahisa’s eyes. Or rather, his eyes were opened wide in surprise. Why?

“Mmgh...!”

Because Julia had suddenly covered his mouth with her own in a kiss. Takahisa tried to pull away from her in a fluster, but—

“Mmm...” Julia forcefully grabbed his face and continued to demand his lips. They continued like that for over ten seconds, both of them forgetting to breathe.

“B-Buh! Wh-What...? What are you doing?!” Having finally been released, he hurriedly pulled his face from Julia and pressed his hand to his lips, blushing as he questioned the reason for the kiss.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s really cowardly of me to do this in a situation like this, but...” Julia moved Takahisa’s hand from his lips. She then drew her face close to his again.

“Eh?! Wha?! Huh?!” Takahisa squeaked, voice cracking from shock. The fact he had killed someone was completely blown from his mind, leaving no trace of his earlier pain.

“I’m going to make this clear upfront,” Julia said as preface, making eye contact with him from close up. “I’m in love with you, Takahisa.”

She pushed him down onto the bed and passionately kissed him once again.

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Meanwhile, in the Holy City Tonerico, Holy Kingdom of Almada...

It was night, around the same time Takahisa and Julia were running into the inn. Pope Fenris Tonerico was shut in his office, sorting through the paperwork that had accumulated during his absence. There was no one in the room besides the pope, until—

"Hey, big brother. I've come to give my report."

A young girl came inside through the open balcony door, breaking the tranquil silence. Her white outfit resembled the clothing affiliated with the temple, but the pope's office balcony was located twenty meters above the ground. A sudden entry like this was quite the concern—how did she even get there?

"You're late," Fenris said with a sigh, pausing his writing.

"I went around the capital after talking to Rio. It was quite fun seeing the world on the surface after such a long time," the small girl—Eru—replied, without any hesitation. She had called out to Rio and Sora in the city and spoken to them at the restaurant today. It seemed she had been exploring the capital ever since.

"I see your tendency to come and go as you please hasn't changed. Good grief..."

"Not as much as you." Fenris shot her an exasperated look, but Eru merely giggled.

"So how did meeting him go?"

"It was a success. First, he isn't the Dragon King we know—he didn't show any reaction to my face. So he's either lost his memory, or he's someone else with the Dragon King's power," she said.

"So it's as we thought..."

"On top of that, he didn't come here on Lina's orders. I believe there's very little chance of his receiving Lina's orders at this point in time."

"What makes you believe that?"

"He didn't seem to know why he came to this land himself. He suspects that something happened here, but he doesn't know what. It was more like he had come here to find proof *because* he didn't know anything."

"I see..."

Fenris stared into empty space and hummed.

"If he's wary of this land creating a problem, we should be fine to just let him be for now. Although I'd personally like to interact with him

more.”

“Please refrain from making unnecessary contact.”

“I know. I’m just saying to keep leaving it to me if you wish to pry into his movements from here. Didn’t you have things you wanted to get done elsewhere while he was here? That’s why you came back for the golem, right?”

“I still intended on staying here for a little longer...”

Rio had left the Galarc Kingdom, scattering the combat power of his side. It was the best chance to take out all of his forces individually, but Fenris was hesitant. And the reason for that was...

“Are you still worried about that girl?”

“Yes. Even without any orders, Lina must have foreseen him coming to this land.”

Fenris suspected Rio had made preparations for this situation where he was away from the Galarc Kingdom with his forces scattered.

“Perhaps that’s what she’s aiming for. Hinting at her presence to control her opponent’s movements is one of that woman’s devious tricks. How many times have we regretted sitting back and watching carefully?”

“Right...” Fenris sighed heavily, as though to express how much he hated fighting the Wise God Lina.

“Besides, there’s a limit to that woman’s precognition. There’s nothing she can do about helpless situations even if she predicts them. That’s why I think we should take the offensive and move how we want. Especially for plans that normally would have a high chance of succeeding.”

“You’re being very encouraging today.”

“Because it sounds more interesting this way, no?” Eru said, her smile full of curiosity.

“Good grief...”

“Besides, you’re about to mobilize the golem you’ve kept stored away so carefully for the past thousand years. I doubt anyone besides the transcendent ones and their disciples could stop that thing. If they could, it would be proof there are other transcendent ones or disciples besides the Dragon King out there. That’s why it isn’t a bad idea all round. You could even go all out and mobilize multiple at once.”

“You have a point. If we’re going to be stepping on the dragon’s tail anyway...” Fenris hummed as though he had made up his mind.

Just then, a knock came from the door of the pope’s office. Eru immediately retreated to the balcony with a shrug, not wanting the trouble

of explaining her presence.

"You may enter," Fenris said.

The door opened and his secretary Anna Mendoza entered the room.

"My apologies for the late visit, Your Holiness. Someone has asked for an urgent audience with you. We would normally have turned them away at this ridiculous hour, but he was in possession of an article with your personal emblem on it..." the priest said with a shameful look.

"Oh? Who is it?"

Only a select few people were in possession of Fenris's emblem. At the same time, there were only a small number of people aware that he had returned to the holy capital.

"A mercenary named Nick."

Was it a coincidence? The name Anna uttered was the same as that of the mercenary hired by Norman in the capital of the Galarc Kingdom, currently investigating the death of the young master.

"Is that so...? Tell him I would love to speak to him. Escort him to this room instead of the public audience hall. There will be no need for guards."

"Right away." Anna bowed respectfully and left to fetch Nick.

Nick should be undercover in the Galarc Kingdom capital right now. A report with this timing is intriguing. What will he have to say...?

Fenris smiled in delight as he leaned back in his seat.

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Meanwhile, at the mansion in the Galarc Kingdom, the same night Takahisa killed the young master...

"..."

Unable to sleep, Ayase Miharu repeatedly sighed into the darkness. Naturally, the source of her woes was Takahisa's disappearance.

"I don't like you, Takahisa. I hate you. I won't be with you. I don't want to be near you. Don't show your face in front of me ever again."

The words she had said at the height of her emotions looped in her head.

Was it because I said that to him? Because I slapped him...?

Miharu looked down at the palm of the hand she had used to slap him and pursed her lips bitterly.

"You're in love with me, aren't you, Lily? Aren't you saying such horrible things for the sake of your kingdom, because you don't want me to

be with Miharu?"

The moment she saw Takahisa verbally attacking Lilianna, she had been unable to hold back the anger overflowing from her heart.

After all, Miharu had already informed Takahisa that she couldn't reciprocate his feelings. So why had he been insulting Lilianna as though Miharu had responded to him? Why had he been speaking so badly of Lilianna? That was what Miharu couldn't understand. She couldn't forgive him for hurting Lilianna like that, and she couldn't forgive herself for not rejecting him more clearly before. Before she knew it, her body was moving of her own accord and slapping him.

It was the first time she had felt that much anger towards someone. She didn't know what else she could have done at that moment, and she'd believed what she did was right at the time. But now that Takahisa had disappeared...

What should I have done instead?

Was it her fault she had rejected him? Should she have accepted his feelings? Would things have gone better if she had responded to his feelings? Just what would the right thing to do have been? Those were the questions Miharu pondered to herself.

And that wasn't the only thing on her mind.

That dream...

Miharu recalled the words in the dream she'd had just the other day.

"You will have to make a decision at some point.

"An extremely vital decision.

"I highly recommend you choose the wrong choice."

In her dream, an unfamiliar woman's voice had spoken to her. It was strange—it had definitely occurred in her dream, yet the memory was oddly vivid in her mind.

Was the wrong choice to forgive Takahisa?

Miharu seriously considered the advice she'd received in her dream. Did the woman in her dream know what would happen in the future? Was that why she'd given her that advice? If so, did she know where Takahisa was right now? If she could tell what would happen in the future, it wouldn't be strange for her to know where he was.

There was no end to Miharu's questions.

If I can see that dream one more time...

Would she be able to learn anything?

Although she didn't feel sleepy in the slightest, Miharu went to lie

down on the bed.

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Before she knew it, Miharu was standing in a white world.

“Wha...?!”

It was the same dream... There was no mistaking it. Miharu glanced around with a gasp.

“You’re late,” a woman’s voice said from seemingly nowhere.

“Ah!” Although she couldn’t see her, Miharu recognized the voice as the same one that’d spoken to her last time.

“It’s your first time sleeping in two days, so you were knocked out as soon as you went to lie down,” the owner of the voice said to Miharu.

“Huh?” Unable to understand what the voice was telling her so suddenly, Miharu tilted her head blankly.

“You didn’t sleep a wink after slapping him yesterday, remember? That’s why you were sleep-deprived today.”

“Oh, right...” Miharu nodded, taken aback by how the words meant she had been watched the entire time. But she soon snapped back to her senses. “Umm, do you know where Takahisa is right now?!” she asked the voice.

“Cutting right to the chase, I see. Well, I guess you could say I do.”

“Please tell me!”

“I can’t.” The owner of the voice rejected Miharu’s request curtly.

“Wh-Why not...?”

“I’m not trying to be mean. The future that I know of isn’t something I can share with others to begin with. Doing so would break taboos and levy a penalty upon me, so it’s too risky. Well, there are *some* things I’m willing to risk the penalty for—but not this one,” the voice said, explaining the reason she couldn’t tell Miharu the future.

Miharu’s expression indicated how much she wanted to know the answer anyway, but she didn’t say anything out loud. She held her silence in frustration.

“More importantly, you seem to be confident that I know the future. You don’t think this is a regular dream, do you?” the voice continued, breaking the silence.

“I do, but...”

But what? Miharu herself didn’t know what she wanted to say and struggled for words.

“It’s because you’re grasping at straws, isn’t it? Do you really want to know his location so badly?”

“I do.” Miharu nodded immediately.

“Didn’t you say you’d never forgive him? You never wanted to see his face again, right? Why do you care where he is?” the voice asked sadistically.

“That’s...” Miharu was at a loss for words.

“Is it because you didn’t think this would happen? Impulsive actions come hand in hand with regret, you know?” the voice pointed out as though she could read Miharu’s mind.

“Yes...” Miharu nodded glumly.

“You’re not the brightest, but at least you’re honest.” The voice sighed in disappointment. “The reason I can’t tell you his location is because it’s too late already. The future has already branched,” she explained.

“The future has branched? And what do you mean by ‘too late’...?”

“Yes. The slightest decision has the potential to create infinite branches into the future. When you rejected him yesterday, the future branched into the most troublesome route.”

“So when you said to choose the wrong choice...”

“Yes, you had to forgive him there.”

“Wasn’t that a little hard to realize...?” The warning hadn’t even come to mind back at that moment.

“Like I said earlier, the future that I know of isn’t something that can be shared. In order to avoid the penalty, all I could do was give you a hint.”

“Then you can give me a hint about where Takahisa is right now too,” Miharu suggested hopefully.

“I will not.”

The voice specifically answered with “will not” instead of “cannot,” curtly and bluntly. Pressured by the force of that response, Miharu swallowed back her next words.

“There’s no need to make that face. I also said this earlier—the future has already branched. I don’t need you taking unnecessary actions to make it branch even further in a worse direction. After all, I no longer have the power to see the future.”

“So what will happen to Takahisa from here?”

“Umm, hello? Were you listening to me at all?” the voice said, exasperated.

“Huh...?”

“I cannot tell you the future so easily.”

“Oh... R-Right. I’m sorry.” Miharu lowered her head in a fluster.

“Honestly, why does this woman have to be so stupid...” There was a clear tone of irritation in the voice’s sigh. Miharu held her tongue awkwardly.

“Well, whatever. I’ll just have to work harder to make up for how hopeless you are.”

“Huh...?”

“Unfortunately, time’s up. From now on, I’ll be choosing the memories you get to keep. I don’t want you making unnecessary decisions based on the information you gain from your dreams.”

“You can’t—” Miharu tried to say something in a hurry.

“Besides, there’s nothing I need to rely on you for in the near future anyway. If anything, this branch in the future means an event beyond your capabilities will occur.”

“What...?” Miharu started speaking, but quickly stopped herself from asking what kind of event it would be midsentence.

“At least you’ve learned a little. Keep showing me your intelligent side and I’ll rely on you again someday. Do your best.”

“R-Right.”

“Oh, and one more thing...” The voice paused as though she had just remembered something.

“I need to borrow your body for a bit,” she said out of the blue.

“What...?”

“There’ll be a big reward for you at the end, so look forward to it,” the voice said while Miharu was still dumbfounded, and Miharu’s consciousness cut off there.

Chapter 5: Already Too Late

In the capital of the Galarc Kingdom, inside a cheap inn downtown, morning was nearly over, and the time was fast approaching noon.

“Mm...”

Sendo Takahisa woke up; he seemed to have fallen asleep on his side. His mind slowly surfaced from sleep and he opened his eyes to see Julia’s face right before him.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

The two had fallen asleep beneath the same thin blanket. Takahisa blinked a few times, still half asleep.

“Good morning, Takahisa,” Julia said with a grin.

“M-Morning,” he eventually said with a blush.

“Hmm? Are you blushing?” Julia asked teasingly.

“If you woke up first, you could have woken me...” Takahisa looked away from Julia to hide his embarrassment.

“I wanted to watch your sleeping face.”

“I...see...”

“And I only just woke up as well. It should almost be noon, I think.”

“Huh? We slept for that long?”

“Well yeah, considering everything we did last night... Y’know?”

Julia’s cheeks reddened as she grinned mischievously. Takahisa’s face grew redder and redder.

“You’re so easy to read, Takahisa. Ha!” Julia grinned and clung to Takahisa.

“Wah! H-Hey! They’re touching me! Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?!” Takahisa warned her in a panic. He used both his hands to stop her from clinging to him naked.

“Eh? We went way further than just touching each other yesterday. Isn’t it a bit late for that?”

“Well... Erm...”

“Who was the one devouring my body as he pleased again?” Julia snuggled up to Takahisa and questioned him with feigned innocence.

“Y-You were the one who started it... Doing what you pleased...” Takahisa stopped pushing her back with his hands and gave in to her.

“Then we’re equally to blame,” Julia said with a cheerful smile.

Takahisa smiled back at her peacefully. Just then, both their stomachs rumbled at the same time. They both giggled at the sound.

“Sounds like we’re hungry. Let’s go get some food,” Julia suggested.

Thus, the two went on their way to find food.

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Roughly half an hour later...

“Thank you for the meal.”

Takahisa and Julia finished eating the food they’d brought to their room from the inn’s dining hall and sat face-to-face at the table.

“Phew, I’m so full.” Julia sighed in satisfaction.

“Yeah, we ate well...” Takahisa, who’d finished eating just a little before her, rubbed his stomach and agreed.

Julia hadn’t eaten anything since noon the previous day, and Takahisa’s last meal had been dinner two nights ago, so they had spent the entire meal eating in silence.

“It feels like I’m living life to the fullest right now,” Julia said, staring into the distance with a look of happiness.

“What about you, Takahisa?” she asked.

“Yeah... I’m managing to hold on thanks to you, Julia.” Takahisa clenched his jaw with a pained look, his expression steeped with intense guilt. The mistakes he’d made at the castle and his murder of the young master weighed on his chest like a thorny lump.

“It’s not your fault,” Julia suddenly said, defending Takahisa.

“Huh?”

“The young master’s death wasn’t your fault. He merely received divine punishment for all the evil deeds he’d committed until now. A man like that deserved to die.”

Takahisa lowered his head in guilt, saying nothing in response.

“He treated people like objects. He threatened people, stole their freedom, pocketed all the money other people risked their lives to earn, and acted like he was within his rights to do all of it. He’d get angry at the slightest criticism and wave his weapons around. He was the worst scum in the world.”

Julia justified the young master’s death, speaking as though she was relieved.

“But it isn’t right to kill people.”

“You’re wrong!”

“Wh...?”

Takahisa’s eyes widened at how harshly Julia had spoken in denial.

“You’re wrong! You didn’t kill him. You saved me, Takahisa!”

“But...”

“Saving people is a good thing, isn’t it? Or are you saying it’s bad to save others?”

“That’s...”

Just an excuse, were the words on the tip of Takahisa’s tongue. But he didn’t say them out loud. He swallowed them before they came spilling out and held his silence. Perhaps he wanted to soften the pressure of his sins and find peace in Julia’s words.

“I’d always hated it. I always felt pathetic. Being forced to return a loan I didn’t take out, being forced to become a slave and work in a brothel, having no freedom... I was reminded at every point that there was nothing I could do about it. I ran away from that unpleasant reality with no hope for tomorrow, because it was easier to live without thinking.”

Julia suddenly clutched her slave collar and started talking about her life. She then stood up from her seat and walked over to where Takahisa sat facing her.

“Takahisa, you’re the one who saved me from that. You’re the one who gave me a new tomorrow. When the young master died, my first thought was ‘Ah, I’m finally free.’ It’s all thanks to you. You’re my prince,” she emphasized, shaking his shoulders.

“Julia...”

“That’s why you’re not bad. I won’t forgive anyone who says what you did was wrong.” Julia embraced Takahisa as though to say she’d protect him.

“Thank you... But I’m really not a prince.” Takahisa’s facial muscles relaxed as though he had been saved. He smiled shyly as the weight lifted off his shoulders.

“I told you yesterday you’d do as *my* prince, didn’t I?”

“Do you have an obsession with princes or something...?”

“Well, I did always admire them. I lived every day hoping a prince would come save me one day,” Julia answered, using Takahisa’s thighs as a seat as she clung to him.

“I-I see...” Takahisa startled at the sudden contact.

“Besides...”

“Hmm?”

“The first time I saw you, I truly thought you were like a prince. Your appearance certainly gave me that impression,” Julia revealed bashfully.

“Aha ha,” Takahisa laughed in amusement.

“But your personality was kind of a disappointment. Your lack of money too.”

“Ha... Ha ha...” Takahisa’s smile twitched at Julia’s follow-up comment.

“If you’re not a prince though, what are you?” Julia watched Takahisa for his reaction as she finally asked about his background.

“Come to think of it, I still haven’t told you about myself. You didn’t ask anything either...”

“Yeah, because you obviously had some things going on. But will you tell me now?” Seated on Takahisa’s lap, Julia peered into his face at point-blank range.

“I’m...a hero.” Takahisa made up his mind and revealed his identity.

“Huh...?” Julia was taken aback and blinked.

“I’m a hero. The one from the Kingdom of Centostella. I was staying in the Galarc Castle until yesterday,” Takahisa added with a wry smile.

“Huh? Wha?”

“Err, do you know what a hero is?”

“I do, but what? A hero?! You?!” Julia leaned back in utter surprise.

“Yup, me.”

“Isn’t that more amazing than a prince?!”

“I don’t think so...?” The corner of Takahisa’s mouth crinkled up in embarrassment.

“Huh? HUH?” Julia raised her voice, staring at Takahisa. “HUH?!”

“Is it really that surprising?”

Takahisa had no idea what a normal reaction towards a hero should be, so all he did was shrug uncomfortably.

“Of course it is! Heroes are the people who appear in the fairy tales that everyone knows. I knew there was some commotion before about the heroes appearing, but I never expected to meet or speak to one in person!”

“You met me yesterday and we’ve been talking this entire time... If anything, the way you’re clinging so closely to me is more...” Takahisa pointed out with a subtle blush. Julia was still sitting on his lap, so it made no sense for her to make a fuss over speaking to him at this point.

“Wha? Oh, well, that’s true... You have a point. Aha ha, especially

after last night...” Julia recalled how they had lain with each other all night long and blushed. She quickly climbed off his lap and distanced herself from him.

“Umm, you don’t have to avoid me so blatantly all of a sudden either,” Takahisa said with a sad pout.

“I-I just need time to calm down. You can’t just bring up being a hero like that... I mean, I could tell you were important the first time I saw you. No wonder your clothes are such good quality. Ah, should I be speaking to you more politely? And calling you Sir Takahisa instead?!” Julia seemed to be rather shaken, flailing her arms in a fluster.

“C-Calm down, it’s fine. You can just treat me like you have been until now! Deep breaths, okay?” Similarly flustered, Takahisa tried to calm her down.

“R-Right, deep breaths. Phew... Hah...” With that, Julia finally gathered her composure.

“Better now?”

“Somewhat.”

“That aside, you believed me immediately when I said I’m a hero...” Takahisa watched Julia’s expression. After all, he had no way of proving it.

“Yup, I believe you.” Julia nodded innocently.

After being told so many times that he couldn’t be trusted by everyone at the castle, Takahisa felt her words keenly.

“Thank you...” he mumbled, face crumpling as he thanked her in a teary voice.

Seeing him like that made Julia sigh quietly. “It seems I’m really weak to that face of yours. I wonder why...”

She reapproached the chair he was sitting in and gently hugged his head to her chest.

Unable to point out her breasts were pressed against his face, Takahisa asked in embarrassment, “What face...?”

“Hmm... The face of an abandoned puppy? It makes me want to spoil you and protect you... Is it because you’re triggering my motherly instincts?” Julia said, squeezing her arms around Takahisa more tightly. “Listen, can I ask more about your situation, Takahisa?”

“Of course...”

“Why did you run away from the castle?”

“How... How did you know?” Takahisa asked back in surprise.

“Why would a hero from the castle be in the shady red-light district by himself?”

“I guess it does seem obvious when you put it like that.”

“Yup. Besides,” Julia paused, pursing her lips as though to summon her courage, “you said you upset the girl you love, right?”

“Ha ha...”

“Was it that bad?”

Takahisa stiffened, then hunched over and nodded. “Really terrible... She said she never wanted to see me again.”

“I see. Then that girl must have terrible taste in men. How else could she act so coldly to such a good man? I’m sure she’s regretting it now that you’re gone.” Julia pouted, expressing her displeasure in Takahisa’s place.

“You think so?” Takahisa asked unsurely.

“Yes, I’m sure of it.”

Julia answered firmly and instantly, giving her stamp of approval. She patted Takahisa’s back encouragingly, soothing him like he was a frightened animal. She eventually felt the strength drain from his body as he relaxed.

“So what are you going to do from here?” Julia asked, bringing up a new topic.

“What do you mean...?”

“What are your plans for the future? Will you go back to the castle?”

Takahisa stiffened once more as though to say no, he didn’t want to.

“So you don’t want to go back. Okay, that means we can’t rely on the castle. I can’t return to the brothel, and there’s nowhere else we can turn to either. But it’ll also be dangerous to remain in the capital like this...”

Julia hummed in thought as she rubbed his back. Then an idea came to her mind and she let out a gasp. “How about we run away together and go somewhere far away?” she suggested.

“Somewhere far away...?”

“Yup. I’ll comfort you until you get sick of me, then we can live together happily ever after. Once we become old and wrinkly, we’ll look back on what happened yesterday and today and tell each other, ‘I remember that man, he was better off dead after all,’ and, ‘Oh yeah, there was a woman like that, but I’m much happier with Julia instead,’ and laugh over it.”

By then, time would have healed everything. That’s why they should throw everything aside and run away together—was what Julia said to

Takahisa with a carefree smile.

"Yeah... You're right. That might be good too." Takahisa paused for a while, but eventually nodded his head.

"All right, it's decided!" Julia said excitedly, happily clinging tighter to Takahisa. "We'll have to prepare for our departure. What do we need for a journey? Travel expenses? I wonder if I have enough money...?" In high spirits, she quickly went over all the things they needed to do before they left in her head.

"If it's money we need, how about we sell my clothes?" Takahisa suggested, watching Julia with a smile.

"Huh? Is that okay? They look like such expensive clothes..."

"That's precisely why. I'll only stand out if I wear them, so it's better to get rid of them. Selling them would be better than throwing them away."

"I see. Then if you don't mind, let's do that. Thank you." Julia beamed as she thanked him.

"It's fine. The problem is where to sell them..."

"We have to sell them off and leave as quickly as possible. The organization the young master was in has quite a lot of influence over the poorer parts of the city, so we won't be able to hide forever."

They would have noticed his death and started the search for the two of them by now, Julia explained.

"I see... Then we better hurry."

"Yup. I know a good store to sell at. Normal stores will refuse to buy high-quality items they consider suspicious, but this store will buy without asking questions."

"Is it a shady store...?"

"I think it should be fine. Well, there are a lot of shady clients, but that's why they're very secretive about their business. I know brothel workers who sell gemstones they don't need there."

"All right, then let's go there together."

"No. I'll go alone."

"Huh? Why?"

"They know we ran away together, so they'll be on the lookout for hooded people walking in a pair."

"In that case, I'll go alone—"

"You've never been to this side of the city, have you? Would you know where it is even if I gave you the address?"

“Urk...”

“You wouldn’t know how to live outside a castle. Leave this to me.”

Takahisa gave in and nodded. “Fine... But be careful.”

“Of course. With that decided...”

From where she sat on Takahisa’s lap, Julia brought her face close to his as though she was about to kiss him—and started groping his upper body over his clothes flirtatiously.

“H-Hey, weren’t you about to leave to sell the clothes...?”

Just what had Takahisa imagined? He blushed until he looked like his face had been painted with bright red paint.

“I’m checking for what can be sold. It’d be pitiful to leave you naked, so I’ll spare your shirt and pants.”

Julia grinned and began to strip Takahisa of his clothes.

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In the morning, around the time Takahisa and Julia woke up...

The silver werewolf girl Sara had left the Galarc Castle with Charlotte’s personal guards in order to search for Takahisa. Sara’s contract spirit, Hel, was materialized in the shape of a large dog and led the way.

A downpour of rain last night had caused the search to be called off. The rain had washed away any scent of Takahisa, making it difficult to track him. But that was no trouble for Hel’s and Sara’s senses of smell after enhancing their bodies with spirit arts.

They took over the search from where the castle’s search team had left off yesterday and spent several long hours searching from early morning. Eventually, they arrived at the red-light district of the capital and paused at the entrance of the main street leading in.

“There’s no mistaking it. The scent continues this way,” Sara said to the young female knight with her.

“This way...leads to the red-light district.”

The commander of the knights, named Louise, checked their location on a map. She didn’t seem to have a very good impression of the red-light district, as there was a grim look on her face as she spoke.

“Red-light district?”

Sara tilted her head curiously, unfamiliar with the term. There was no red-light district in the spirit folk village, so that was a natural reaction for her.

“It’s, well... A place where certain services are sold... Ahem. It’s not a

very safe area. But there should be no problems during the day, so let's continue with care."

Embarrassed by explaining such a thing, Louise cleared her throat and brushed off the matter.

"All right."

Thus, Sara and the knights braced themselves and entered the red-light district.

This scent is...

There were barely any people on the streets of the red-light district at this early hour, but there was a strong and peculiar scent ingrained in the area. That seemed to make Sara realize what kind of place they were in, as she blushed faintly.

"It's this way," she said, clearing her throat briefly. She led the knights to a backstreet off the main road. However...

"Oh? This seems to be a dead end," Louise said, looking around at the alley.

"It seems he stopped here for some time. He was probably sitting here," Sara explained, pointing to where the scent was the strongest.

"You can even tell he was sitting? That's amazing... No one must be able to escape you and Hel." Louise praised the two of them in awe.

"It's not that big of a deal. Let's turn back. I'll search for where he went from here." Sara looked a little shy as she shook her head, then turned back to the main street of the red-light district. This time, she noticed Takahisa's scent leading down a different alley and followed the scent down that way.

They proceeded down the backstreet of the red-light district until Sara and Hel stopped before a certain building.

"It seems he entered this building," Sara reported, looking up at the building. It was the brothel that Julia had worked at until yesterday.

The knights all had awkward expressions on their faces. They knew he had run away out of grief, but they didn't want to believe a hero had run straight into a brothel.

"There was someone with him. A young woman, I believe," Sara added hesitantly.

"I see... And they went in here. We'll have to go in and ask..." Louise sighed and moved to enter the building.

"Please wait a moment," Sara said, stopping her.

"Is something the matter?"

Sara pointed at the alley beside the brothel. “The scent continues into that alley beside the building. It seems like a dead end, so let’s check that out first.”

“All right.”

Thus, the group entered the alley beside the building. That being said, the dead-end alley was less than ten meters long, and immediately came to a stop from the walls of other buildings. The group stopped as soon as they entered the alley.

Louise looked around at the alley and tilted her head curiously. “What was Sir Takahisa doing here?”

The dead end of the alley could clearly be seen without even entering it. There was no need to turn into such a place for no particular reason. A grim look came over Sara’s face as she walked down the alley with Hel. When she reached a certain spot, she crouched down. It was the spot where the young master had died. His corpse had already been moved, and the blood had been washed away by the rain, but...

There’s no mistaking it. This is the scent of blood...

Sara sniffed out the lingering scent with certainty. The problem was whom the blood belonged to, and why it had been spilled here. Not even Sara was able to tell that much through her nose alone.

Did he move around here? The scent of the woman he entered the building with is here as well. Does the blood spilled here have anything to do with Takahisa?

She considered the various possibilities as she looked around the alley.

“Is something the matter, Lady Sara?” Louise called out to her back.

“Hey, ladies,” a man’s voice said. There were around ten rough-looking men standing by the entrance of the brothel. One of them had called out to Louise and the others in the alleyway.

“Who are you?” Louise demanded with a stern look, reaching for the sheath at her waist. Her four subordinate knights swiftly reached for their swords as well.

“Whoa there, no need for that. We have no intention of picking a fight with a noble lady’s knights.” The man at the front of the group raised his hands exaggeratedly, expressing how they had no will to fight. He then looked up at the brothel building and introduced himself. “The name’s Norman. I’m the one in charge of this area, and I own the brothel here too.”

He was the uncle of the young master that had been killed—the same

person searching for the missing Takahisa and Julia.

"How convenient. We have business with your brothel. Let's hear what you have to say," Louise said, returning the sword she had almost drawn back into its sheath. However, she remained wary of the men, as the gaze in her eyes was still sharp.

"Oh? What business would beautiful young knights like you have at a red-light district in the outskirts?" Norman asked, licking his lips as he observed them all closely. But when he spotted Sara crouching at the back of the alley, his eyes widened dramatically.

"If you're here to find employment, you're all very welcome. One of the workers here just went missing, so we're in need of new people. The silver-haired girl at the back in particular would be top of the line. She'd be able to make dozens of gold coins in a night if she wanted," he said with a vulgar grin.

"Insolent man!" Louise reached for the sword in her sheath once again.

"Calm down. I said we have no intention of picking a fight. With this many beauties gathered in the red-light district, you never know if at least one of you could be interested in working here. It'd be ruder not to say anything."

Norman admonished Louise in a hurry, raising his hands to show his compliance.

"Tch... We're here on an investigation. I'll overlook your impudence if you answer our questions, but there'll be no mercy the next time you lump us in with your lot."

Louise clicked her tongue and sheathed her sword, prioritizing the questioning.

"I see. An investigation... However, we're running an honest and legitimate business here. What is there to investigate?" Norman shrugged in an aloof manner while staring at Louise sharply.

"We're searching for a boy in his midteens. He has brown-tinted black hair and a thin build, and is roughly 170 to 180 centimeters in height. Did someone fitting this description, possibly wearing tailored clothing, come to this brothel last night?"

When Louise described Takahisa's appearance, Norman's expression stiffened. "We are a high-class establishment, and our reputation means everything to us. Even if that boy visited, we cannot freely give out information about our customers."

"Are you refusing to answer?"

“Well, not if I have a duty to do so. I’m just saying that I can’t reveal anything confidential to a group of people I don’t know the backgrounds of myself.”

“We are knights directly serving the royal family at the castle. This is an investigation ordered by His Majesty himself. All residents of the kingdom are obliged to cooperate with the investigation.” Louise presented the metal plate with the crest of the royal family stamped into it.

“Oh my, His Majesty himself? In that case, as a citizen living in this kingdom, I will endeavor to answer the best that I can.” Norman agreed to the questioning in a dramatic tone.

“Did a boy matching those features come here?”

“Yes, there was a boy like that. Don’t tell anyone I revealed that though. I didn’t meet him in person, but he was certainly here. It isn’t rare for an establishment as high-class as ours to receive noble clients, but he stood out in his particularly fine clothes. He apparently said he wanted to try doing it with a shabby woman.” Norman gave his reply with a vulgar chuckle.

“I see. So he was here...” Louise sighed heavily, pressing a hand to her head to hold back her headache.

“So why are you in search of that boy? Who is he?”

“He is a person of high importance. Do not pry any further. More importantly, do you know where he went afterwards?”

“Unfortunately, there is no way for us to tell where our customers go after they leave the store. Regrettable as it is...” Norman replied with a smile devoid of any emotion.

“I see.”

“I have a question as well. Was anyone injured or killed in this alleyway recently?” Sara asked, standing up and looking at the spot where the young master was killed.

“Oh...?”

“There’s a strong scent of blood left behind.”

“How...?”

How could she tell? Norman wondered as his eyes widened in shock. But when he saw Hel materialized as a large silver wolf, a look of understanding crossed his face.

Louise startled. “Is that true?!” she asked Sara.

“Yes. His scent is faint, but it’s there beside the stench of blood. Could you tell us if the blood spilled here has anything to do with the boy we’re

searching for?" Sara asked boldly, staring at Norman.

"Why, color me impressed... Indeed, someone did die here the other day. Is that puppy of yours able to tell who the murderer is?" Norman asked Sara, his eyes fixed on Hel.

Sara slowly shook her head. "No, there are too many scents here to be able to tell that."

"I see..."

"Hey. Answer the question first. Is the boy we're searching for related to the incident that happened here?" Having imagined the worst-case scenario in her head, Louise's tone harshened.

"No, they're unrelated. There was a bit of a scuffle here that resulted in bloodshed. The victim was my nephew, not the boy you're after. I don't know why the boy's scent would be here as well."

"I see... Sorry for your loss. If you're still in search of the culprit, I can contact the local patrol and put in a word for you."

"No, there's no need for that. The incident is on its way to being solved," Norman replied immediately.

"All right. If you have the time, please ask around for anyone who's seen the boy once again. There will be a cash reward for any useful information. We will probably stop by to investigate again ourselves, but you can bring any information to the nearby station as well."

"That's a rather generous offer. Fortunately, I have quite a few contacts outside the red-light district. I'll ask around about the whereabouts of that boy for you."

"Please do. Now if you'd excuse us."

Louise shot Sara and her subordinates a look, indicating her intention for them to leave the dead-end alley.

"We shall head back to the brothel as well."

Norman led his thugs back inside the building.

"Let's go that way next," Sara said, pointing in the next direction the scent led.

Thus, the group resumed their search away from the brothel Takahisa had been at. But after walking for about ten meters, Sara looked back at the entrance of the alley they had left.

The scent of blood hanging in the air over there... It's faint, but Takahisa's scent is mixed in with it...

She shook her head to dispel those unnecessary thoughts and looked away from the alley.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, as soon as Norman entered the door of the brothel...

“Hmph. To think the kingdom would dispatch the royal knights to the red-light district. It seems the rumors you heard in the noble district were true, Nick,” he said to the mercenary walking beside him.

He was referring to the events of that morning, when Nick had brought back the intel he had gathered in the noble district of the capital. In short, the rumor was that a hero visiting the Galarc Castle had gone missing since yesterday, no one knew where he had gone, and the castle was in an uproar. And now, knights dispatched by the king were in the red-light district as part of an investigation. Which meant...

“Indeed so. Who would have expected a legendary hero to buy a woman from a brothel, huh? I was half skeptical at first, but this pretty much confirms he was the one who killed the young master.”

“Yes, we’ll have to find that hero before the castle does...” Norman declared, boiling with irrepressible anger.

“But isn’t it bad if the castle is making a serious effort on the search?” one of the thugs said hesitantly.

“Huh?”

“I-It might be easy for us to apprehend him first, but the knights were tracking his scent using a dog. Even if we catch him first, wouldn’t they be able to know that? It’d be risky to kill the hero and defy the kingdom, so wouldn’t it be better to hand over the hero and receive the cash reward from the kingdom instead...?”

The thug twitched nervously under Norman’s glare as he explained why he was opposed to revenge.

“He’s got a point...”

“We really shouldn’t be killing a hero.”

“It should be a significant amount of cash too, right?”

The other thugs expressed similar opinions against taking revenge.

“What are you all scared of the bigwigs for?! Have you forgotten who it was that made this red-light district so prosperous?! Not the kingdom, not the hero, but us! We’re not citizens of the kingdom—the red-light district is *our* kingdom!”

Norman didn’t falter in the face of power. The resentment he felt over the murder of his beloved nephew exceeded his fear of authority. The thugs shrank back and fell silent.

“Listen up. I’ll pay the guy who finds the brat who killed Sammy a hefty amount of gold coins. I’ll prepare a fitting position for them too. I have no intention of backing down, no matter if we’re up against a hero or the king himself. Those who want to stay out of it are free to leave, but don’t think you can live where I can see you ever again.”

Norman made appropriate use of threats and bribes to convince the thugs the risk was worth the return.

“If you want to rise in the world, get to work! We know Julia took the brat to buy coats. We also know which area they chose to stay in for the night. The ladies from the castle aren’t your only rivals—the men on lookout in the area will beat you to the punch!”

Norman set the thugs into motion, and they ran out of the brothel in a hurry.

If the castle gets ahold of him, we won’t be able to lay our hands on him. He’s not getting away... I don’t care if he’s a hero. I’ll put an end to him myself.

The flames of revenge burning within Norman were gradually closing in on Takahisa and Julia.

◇ ◇ ◇

Around an hour later at noon, in a district of the Galarc capital with a market stood an old store tucked away between a jumble of buildings and a convoluted series of back alleys. Julia stepped out of the entrance of that store with a hood over her face.

“Heh heh...”

She gazed at the pouch that served as her wallet and smiled happily. Inside were the two gold coins and six large silver coins she had received for selling Takahisa’s clothing. When added with the money she’d originally possessed, her fortune came to a total of four gold coins.

With this much, we should be able to travel for quite some time.

Using this money, they were going to run as far as they could. Julia wishfully thought about the bright future that was in store for them.

Using this money, Takahisa and I will...

Julia carefully tucked the pouch into her clothes and looked up at the sky. After being sold as a brothel worker to repay her parents’ debt, there had been no one she could rely on. That was why she swore she would live the best she could on her own.

There was no dreaming of the future when she was shut away in the

room of a brothel. She'd thought that she'd spend forever at rock bottom, but things were different now.

The sky felt shockingly bright today. She could believe that a different tomorrow from today awaited her. Takahisa would change her tomorrow for her. That's why she believed her meeting with Takahisa was one kind of fate.

After all, Takahisa had lived in a completely different world from a brothel. Two people who should have never crossed paths were now sharing a common destiny.

Wait for me, my prince... No, I guess he'd be my hero now?

She wanted to see him. She really wanted to see him right this moment and leap into his arms. She wanted to feel his skin against hers. Unable to hold back her desire to see him, Julia started walking briskly towards the inn where Takahisa awaited.

However... At the same time, she was also scared. It felt like the moment she let her guard down, her fear would spread through her chest and paint all her happiness black. What if the young master's organization was hunting them down for revenge right this moment? The thought of that made her feel helplessly terrified.

Their departure was the next morning. If they were able to remain hidden until then, an amazing future was sure to be waiting for them.

"..."

Julia eventually broke into a run in an attempt to leave her terror behind her. It was moments later that a hemp sack appeared in front of her, plunging her into darkness.

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Several hours later, at an hour approaching dusk...

Something's not right...

Sendo Takahisa paced around the room of the inn, plagued with worry.

"She said she'd be back in two to three hours..." Julia had yet to return after this long. Had something happened to her?

Don't tell me—did she get caught?

A bad feeling crossed his mind.

"Tch...!"

Takahisa donned his coat, covered his face with the hood, and ran out of his room. Julia had told him not to leave the room, but he couldn't help but act on his worries. He wandered around within sight of the inn's

entrance so he wouldn't miss her in case she returned. After twenty to thirty minutes of circling the inn's entrance...

"Hey, bro."

A number of men approached Takahisa and called out to him. They clearly appeared to be thugs, and not the friendliest of them.

"What do you want...?" Takahisa pulled his hood over his face and replied with blatant wariness.

"You've been moving around suspiciously for a while now. What are you up to?"

"Nothing... I'm just looking for someone. Got a problem?"

"Is that someone a woman called Julia, by any chance?"

"Huh?!" Takahisa showed an obvious loss of composure at Julia's name.

"Looks like we got him."

"All right!"

The men pumped their fists excitedly.

"Who are you people?"

"The owner of the store that woman went to sell your clothes to is under our patronage. Same for the store that sold the coat you're wearing. Get what I'm saying?"

Takahisa's wariness turned to hostility. "What did you do to Julia?!" he demanded.

"She wouldn't spill the beans on your location, you see. But we knew the general area you were staying in, so we searched by process of elimination."

"It helped that you were walking around aimlessly."

The thugs chuckled as they explained the situation smugly.

"Julia better be safe!" Takahisa grabbed at the thugs, completely shaken up.

"That depends on what you do from here, no?"

"Wh...?"

"Let's start with letting go of me, yes?"

"Guh..." Takahisa released the thug, body trembling with vexation.

"Our boss has been looking for you. Come on."

The thugs smirked at the psychological advantage they had. They ordered Takahisa to follow them to where they'd taken Julia.

It was only a few minutes later that Sara and the knights arrived at the inn Takahisa had been staying at.

◇ ◇ ◇

Around the time the sun had finally set...

“We’re here.”

The thugs had led Takahisa back to the red-light district. They stood before a particular building.

“This place is...”

The building was familiar to Takahisa—indeed, it was the brothel where Julia had worked. He stepped foot into the lobby.

“Wait there for a minute,” one of the thugs said before climbing the stairs.

The same man who’d served Takahisa the last time he was in the brothel sat at the reception. But unlike last time, there were bandages wrapped around his shoulder and splinted leg. And above all, he was glaring at Takahisa as though he wanted to kill him. The reason for that was because of the unfair violence he had suffered from Norman over the young master, but Takahisa had no way of knowing that, so he was left in an awkward situation. Before long, the thug that went upstairs returned.

“Follow me,” he said, leading Takahisa up the stairs.

“Go on, move.”

“I know.”

The thug beside him shoved him in the back, making Takahisa frown as he climbed the stairs. Their destination was Julia’s room on the second floor. When they opened the door and entered the room, they found Norman seated on the bed.

“Yo. I’ve been waiting.”

“Where’s Julia?” Takahisa immediately asked, looking around the room. He couldn’t see Julia anywhere. Norman appeared to be alone.

“No need to panic,” Norman said, grinning.

“Ngh?!”

A blunt impact struck the back of Takahisa’s head, shaking his vision.

“Wha...?”

Unable to understand what had happened, Takahisa tried to look behind him as he fell. Reflected in his blurry vision was the mercenary, Nick, that Norman had hired...

Takahisa lost consciousness.

◇ ◇ ◇

Around the time the sun had set and the sky was completely dark, Sara had handed over the search to another squad after pinning down the inn Takahisa had stayed at and returned to the castle. She gave her report of the situation with Louise in a room with King Francois, Miharu, Aki, Masato, Satsuki, Charlotte, and Lilianna present.

“And so, the main search party has taken over the investigation. Lady Lilianna’s knights are accompanying them. They will attempt to persuade Sir Takahisa as soon as he returns to the inn.”

That’s why it was only a matter of time before Takahisa returned to the castle, Louise explained, concluding her report.

“Thank you for searching since so early in the morning, Lady Sara, Lady Louise.”

Lilianna stood up from the sofa and bowed her head deeply towards Sara and Louise.

Louise shook her head and looked at Sara. “I merely accompanied Lady Sara. If it weren’t for her, we wouldn’t have been able to find the inn so quickly.”

“No, we were only able to move so smoothly thanks to your guidance through the streets. The capital is so large, I would have gotten lost if I were alone.”

Miharu also stood up and bowed her head. “Thank you both so much, Sara, Louise.”

“Thank you very much!”

“Thank you for your hard work.”

Aki and Masato both spoke up, following Miharu’s lead.

“We’re so sorry for the trouble our brother has caused...” Masato continued, apologizing to the entire room.

“It’s not something you need to apologize for, Sir Masato. It was my duty to support Sir Takahisa, and I failed to do that.” Lilianna defended Masato, shifting the blame to herself.

“No. If you’re going to say that, then I shouldn’t have gotten emotional and slapped Takahisa,” Miharu began to say.

“That’s not true! I failed to support him as his little sister too!” Aki said, claiming part of the blame as well.

Seeing everyone like that made Satsuki sigh. “Okay, that’s enough! Stop! No more!”

She raised her voice and called for everyone’s attention. Once all eyes were on her, she started speaking.

“For now, we know the inn Takahisa’s staying at, so let’s make one thing clear. This was nobody’s fault. No matter how you look at it, the only one to blame here is Takahisa. Otherwise he’ll just be getting what he wants for throwing his tantrum,” Satsuki stated bluntly.

“This is him throwing a tantrum?” Charlotte asked, tilting her head curiously.

“He knew that rationally, things aren’t going to go the way he wants. So by making unreasonable demands and constantly acting out, he can get everyone else to concede to him.”

It was just like a toddler throwing a tantrum to get what they wanted, Satsuki explained.

“I see. What an interesting comparison.”

And a common sight in the royal court, Charlotte added with a giggle. Francois seemed to find that amusing as well, as he chuckled along with her.

“Just because he couldn’t get Miharu to do what he wanted, he ran away from the castle to make everyone else feel guilty. That’s what Takahisa’s trying to do, in my opinion. I mean, you’re all feeling guilty, aren’t you? If he returned right now, would you all change the way you treat him?”

Miharu, Lilianna, Aki, and Masato fell awkwardly silent at Satsuki’s question.

Satsuki sighed. “As I thought. That’s why I want to make this clear: none of you are at fault. Don’t let Takahisa and his tantrum win,” she said to them sternly.

“I agree with Lady Satsuki’s thoughts on this matter. If you spoil Sir Takahisa here, you’ll be creating the precedent for him to get whatever he wants if he acts out. That won’t be good for Sir Takahisa’s sake, and will only become a burden for all of you in the future,” Charlotte said, taking the initiative to agree with Satsuki.

“That’s right. If Takahisa gets a taste of success here, who knows what he’ll do next time. Will you keep giving him whatever he wants to prevent that from happening? It’s pretty stressful to be unable to say no to something you don’t want to do. And Miharu will be the one getting the short end of the stick.”

It was impossible to pamper him forever, Satsuki convinced Miharu and the others with the support of Charlotte’s statement.

“You’ve got a point. It’d be wrong to let him get away with this, and

Miharu shouldn't feel any responsibility either. What my brother said to Princess Lilianna was the worst. I'll never forgive him for those words. He deserved the slap he got from Miharu."

Masato looked back over how Takahisa had messed up and agreed with Satsuki.

"That's right. You can't forget what Takahisa did. Miharu, Aki, and Princess Lilianna have no need to feel responsible over this matter. In fact, you should all be angry at him. He's the one at fault. Got it?"

As she said, Satsuki was probably angry at Takahisa herself. She looked at Miharu, Aki, and Princess Lilianna, ensuring they were listening to her words.

"Uhm..." Miharu expressed reluctance.

"*Got it?*"

"Y-Yes..." She nodded hesitantly, folding to Satsuki's pressure.

"Good. Next, Aki and Princess Lilianna. *Got it?*"

"Umm..."

Aki was still hesitant. But Aki probably intended to support her brother even if he was in the wrong. Her situation was different from that of Miharu, who'd been one-sidedly forced into her position.

"Takahisa is the one at fault, but that's irrelevant to whether you want to continue to support him or not. If you want to do that, you can."

Satsuki amended her explanation with Aki's situation in mind. Those words seemed to convince Aki, as she nodded firmly. "Okay!"

"Like Lady Aki, I also intend on continuing to support Sir Takahisa from here..." Lilianna said after Aki.

"That's fine. Now that this matter is settled, no more bringing it up again!"

Satsuki clapped her hands together and put an end to the topic. Then, in order to distract them from the matter of responsibility—or perhaps because she was utterly astounded herself—she kept speaking.

"That aside, what was he thinking?! After making such a fuss about Miharu, the first thing he does is run to a brothel to see another woman?! He even stayed overnight at the inn with her... Does that mean he brought her back from the brothel?!"

Satsuki reddened in anger at Takahisa's actions after he left the castle.

"There there. You know how gentlemen can get when their frustrations build up," Charlotte said jokingly, giggling to herself.

"Well, I guess... But still..."

Satsuki blushed, showing a reaction fitting for a girl her age.

"I have a question about that," Lilianna said. "Sir Takahisa shouldn't have had any access to money. How did he obtain the funds for a brothel or inn...?"

She brought up the point that had her concerned.

"Wait, really?"

"Yes. We prepared everything he needed..."

"Did Takahisa receive money from someone before coming to Galarc? Or maybe the girl he was with paid for them?" Satsuki wondered, guessing at the possibilities.

"That's the only explanation I can think of as well..."

"At any rate, we'll know once he returns to the castle. We can ask him then."

"Right... I'll also ask the others from my kingdom if anyone has ever given him any money," Lilianna agreed.

Without knowing what kind of situation Takahisa was currently in, the group ended their meeting together.

◇ ◇ ◇

Somewhere in the red-light district of the Galarc capital...

Splash.

"Ugh..." Takahisa woke up, but was drenched with water.

"Morning, boy," Norman said coldly.

"Agh..." Takahisa lifted his heavy eyelids and gazed vacantly at the sight before him. Norman was seated on the wooden chair in front of him, legs crossed and looking down on Takahisa. The mercenary Nick stood beside him, and the other thugs that'd brought him to the brothel were also nearby. But the angle that Takahisa was looking at them at was strange; everything was rotated exactly ninety degrees, making Takahisa realize he was lying sideways on the floor.

This...

This wasn't Julia's room in the brothel. The interior of her room had been wooden, but the room Takahisa was currently in had a stone floor, walls, and ceiling. There wasn't a single window, and magic artifacts kept the interior bright.

This isn't the brothel?

Was it the basement? Takahisa could remember going to Julia's room, but his thoughts were slowed by having just woken up.

Besides, even if he tried to stand right now, his limbs wouldn't move: they were restrained by heavy shackles. At some point, someone had snapped a magic-sealing collar around him.

"The knights from the castle were looking for you. They were using a trained dog to track your scent, so we relocated somewhere where we won't be disrupted. This is the basement of the brothel, normally reserved for *special* customers. They won't be able to find you even if they can track you into the building."

Even if the knights came to search again, they'd simply lead them to Julia's room on the second floor to avoid suspicion. That was the situation Norman explained to Takahisa.

"Where's Julia...?"

"Hey hey, is your first thought seriously to worry about that dirty prostitute? How kind. I guess that's the legendary hero for you, huh?" Norman laughed mockingly, then looked around at his subordinates for their agreement.

"Heh heh." The thugs all sneered in agreement.

"Julia has nothing to do with this," Takahisa argued, hostility seeping through at the insult towards Julia.

"Huh?" Intense anger oozed from Norman. He stood up from his chair and ran up to Takahisa, using his momentum to kick him in the stomach with all his might.

"Guh?!" Takahisa's body hovered in the air. His organs were crushed, causing him to throw up his stomach acids as he rolled across the floor. Norman approached Takahisa once more and grabbed a fistful of his hair, lifting his head up.

"What do you mean, 'nothing to do with this'? She hid you after you killed Sammy. Even if that wasn't true, it's forbidden for a brothel worker to run off with a customer. It's a serious crime. This is definitely where you die, but don't think it'll be swift and painless." He leered at Takahisa threateningly, leaning right into his face.

"N-No!" Takahisa tried to say something in a fluster.

"Shut up!"

"Gah...!" Norman ground Takahisa's face into the floor.

"Hey, bring the woman here."

"Right away!"

At Norman's order, some of the thugs opened the door and left. They returned from the corridor less than a minute later and threw Julia to the

floor, her hands and feet tied with rope.

"Aah...!" Julia fell heavily, falling before Takahisa.

"J-Julia!" Takahisa shouted in alarm. Their gazes met.

"Takahisa...!"

Julia's face crumpled. Her eyes were red and bloodshot from crying so much, and her eyelids were also swollen like welts. On top of that, the ragged clothes she loved to wear so much were stained red like she'd had a huge nosebleed or something of the sort.

"Wh-What happened? Your clothes are bright red! Is that blood?!" Takahisa's voice cracked in surprise.

"I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I...!"

Tears streamed from Julia's eyes as she apologized through her wails. But Norman grabbed her by the hair. "That isn't who you should be apologizing to, is it now?!"

"Eek...!"

"What did you do to her?!" Takahisa yelled, seeing the fear in Julia's twitching face.

"Healing magic is a convenient thing. If you cast it right after an injury, the wound heals without a trace," Norman said, chuckling.

"Wh-What did you do to Julia?!"

"Oh, nothing much. We just tried to get her to tell us your location. She's still got a few more years of sales in her, so I made sure to hold back, you know? I even had her healed with magic."

"Did you hit her?! In the face?!"

"In the end, she never cracked. She kept insisting she wouldn't say anything. But when she heard you were caught because of her, her heart finally broke. That's why she looks like this now." Norman laughed mockingly.

"How could you do that?!" Takahisa screamed shrilly.

"Huh?! That's what I should be saying to *you*, bastard!" Norman's anger boiled over in an instant, and he kicked Takahisa's face in his rage.

"Gah?!" Takahisa was bent back hard and blown away. At the same time, several of his teeth snapped and came flowing out of his mouth in a stream of blood.

"Takahisa?!" Julia struggled to stand up in her tied state, writhing fiercely on the floor.

"Hey, Julia! Don't get cocky just because we interrogated you so softly. Did you think you wouldn't be treated like him just because you're

going back up for sale after this? Who gave you permission to speak, huh?"

Norman approached Julia and yanked her towards him by the hair. He then shoved her face towards the puddle of blood with Takahisa's teeth in it.

"Eek..."

Julia's face twitched in fear.

"There are good things about having no teeth as well, you know? I can do the same thing to you. Did you know? Teeth don't grow back through healing magic. Funny, isn't it? Shall I pull one of yours out to demonstrate?"

Norman's wide shoulders shook as he guffawed with laughter.

"Ah... Uh..." Julia trembled as she cried.

"S... Stop...it..." Takahisa said as he rolled on the floor.

"Huh? You say something?" Norman abruptly ceased laughing and released Julia's hair. He stood up and walked over to Takahisa once more, bringing his ear close to hear him.

"Stop...it..." Takahisa slurred inarticulately.

"Oh, 'Stop it,' was it?"

Norman tilted his head. "Are you still failing to understand the situation? This is my kingdom. I'm the king. The legendary hero is no greater than a maggot to me. So what gives you the right to order me around? If you're asking the king for a favor, rub your head on the ground and say, 'I beg of you, please stop.' Isn't that how it should be?!"

He grabbed the back of Takahisa's head and ground it into the floor again. He then released his hand, stood up, and looked down expectantly, awaiting Takahisa's words.

With his lips still pressed against the floor, Takahisa trembled from head to toe. He mumbled the demanded words in humiliation. "I... I beg of you... Please...stop..."

"I can't hear you at all, dumbass!" Norman immediately stepped down on the back of Takahisa's head.

"Gah!"

"Is Julia the important one to you? Or is it yourself? Which is it, Mr. Legendary Hero? Who do you want me to forgive, huh?"

"Please... F-Forgive..." Takahisa begged with his face pressed to the floor.

"Nope, not happening, never!" Norman increased the force behind his

leg and stomped on Takahisa's face over and over again. Even the thugs' faces were twitching at Norman's merciless actions.

"Urgh..."

The floor Takahisa's head was against gradually grew dark with blood. When Julia realized that, her face got paler and paler.

"S-Stop it! Please stop!" she screamed.

"Yeah? Hey Julia, did you already forget what I just said? Who gave you the right to speak?" Norman paused in his movements and looked at Julia incredulously.

"Oh... U-Umm... It's just..." Terribly frightened, Julia looked away from Norman. But when Takahisa's tragic state entered her view once again, she mustered up her courage.

"P-Please, I beg of you... Please forgive Takahisa. I'll do anything. You can make me a slave for the rest of my life. I'll earn lots of money for you. So please, please..."

Julia knelt and pressed her forehead against the stone floor, desperately pleading with Norman. Even Norman seemed to be amazed by that, as he gazed at her with a look of deep wonder.

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“Oh? Looks like it’s your lucky day, boy.” Norman lifted his foot off Takahisa’s head and crouched to talk to him. “It’s hard to find a woman who’d go this far for you, you know? How’d you get her to fall this hard for you, huh? Ain’t that a wonder.”

“Uh... Guh...” Takahisa groaned in pain.

“Ah... All right, Julia. Out of respect for your spirit, I’m going to have a chat with this boy. You can go back now.” Norman stood up with a satisfied smirk and ordered Julia to be taken away.

“R-Really?!” Hope filled Julia’s eyes as she lifted her face happily.

“Yes, really. Hey! Take Julia away already.”

“Th-Thank you!”

One of the thugs picked Julia up and carried her out of the room. She continued to plead hopefully at Norman until the moment she left the room. The door immediately closed afterwards, leaving only Takahisa on the floor.

“Hey boy, did you see that? That woman honestly thinks you’ll be saved. What a moron.” Norman chuckled and grabbed Takahisa by the hair.

“Listen here, boy. No—listen here, *great hero*. The man you killed was my beloved nephew. That’s why I’m going to kill you no matter what. I will never forgive you. And yet, that stupid woman rejoiced so happily...”

Norman smiled like he was unable to hold back how funny it was to him.

“Grrruh!” Takahisa made an inarticulate sob.

“That said, I’m no demon. I promised I’d have a *chat* with you, after all. So let’s discuss something interesting. You heard that stupid woman say she’d earn us lots of money, right? But we were intending on working her to her death anyway, so that wasn’t even a bargaining point to begin with. Yet she believed she could negotiate by offering to work for money... Pfft. Ha ha ha ha ha!” Norman ignored Takahisa’s cry and laughed like a child with his deep, hoarse voice.

“Graaah!” Takahisa began to struggle furiously, kicking his legs and flailing his arms. His tied-up limbs and the magic-sealing collar around his neck should have made it harder to control his magic, but he was able to struggle with pure strength alone.

“Hey, you. Hold him down facing up,” Norman ordered his subordinates with a sadistic grin.

“Yes sir.”

“Whoa, he’s strong.”

Two brawny men moved to hold Takahisa down. Once they did, Norman drew the dagger at his waist and showed it to Takahisa.

“Now, legendary hero, I’m going to stab you where you stabbed Sammy and kill you. I’ll even lean my weight forward so slowly, you can feel every inch as it pierces your heart.”

“Ugh! Uuugh!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell that stupid woman you’re still alive so that she can keep working with hope in her heart. I’ll introduce all the worst customers to her first. There are plenty of rich men with outrageous preferences here in the capital.”

“Ugh! Ah!”

“We normally offer our disposable girls to those customers, but that stupid woman will be a special case. Each time she takes a client, I’ll pay to have her healed with magic. It’ll be a sight to see whether her body breaks from something untreatable first, or whether her heart breaks from losing hope. Don’t you agree?” Norman looked down at Takahisa and spoke to him gleefully.

“Guh! Ggh!”

“M-Mr. Norman, please hurry!”

“This guy seriously has the strength of an animal!”

The thugs held Takahisa’s limbs down using all of their body weight.

“All right, all right. How pathetic. Nick, you hold his legs.”

Nick paused for a brief moment, then nodded with a shrug. “Got it.” He moved over and held both of Takahisa’s legs down.

“Bye now, hero boy.” Norman clutched the dagger upside down and crouched down.

“Uuugh!” Tears streamed down Takahisa’s face as he glared at Norman, cursing him to death.

It was at this moment that Takahisa realized it:

In this world, there were bastards no one could do anything about; demon-like humans that were beyond salvation.

Thus, Takahisa asked himself: why had he been so insistent that murder was a bad thing before?

And so, he decided to change his half-deified values. Kill. Killing was the answer. Murder was acceptable. If he had free use of his limbs right now, he would be swinging his sword without hesitation in order to kill this man. No, he would kill everyone here. For the first time in his life,

Takahisa felt bloodlust. But it was too late.

Everything was too late.

“This is for Sammy.”

“Guh?!”

Takahisa’s body lurched up. He watched on as the tip of the knife in Norman’s hand sank into his chest.

“Oh, poor Sammy. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” Norman apologized towards the dead young master as he stabbed Takahisa through the heart over and over again.

“Urgh?! Ugh... Ugh... Uh...”

Takahisa’s body jerked up each time his heart was pierced, but those movements gradually ceased. The light disappeared from Takahisa’s eyes, and his consciousness was cut off.

“All right, you all can throw this rubbish hero into the incinerator now. Make sure you burn everything, including his clothes and that collar.”

Norman stood up and ordered Takahisa’s cremation.

Chapter 6: Sacred Flames of Darkness

The muffled roar of a fierce wind could be heard. A heat that made boiling water feel lukewarm surrounded him.

Was he soaking in a pool of magma in hell?

"...!"

He tried to yell, but no voice came out.

"...!"

It was hot. It felt like both the inside and outside of his body were burning at the same time.

What on earth was happening?

He didn't know. But he wanted to escape from this hell.

Which was why Takahisa...

◇ ◇ ◇

Underneath the brothel was a secret high-powered incinerator that ran on enchanted gems as fuel. The chimney for the incinerator's smoke was connected to the chimney of the kitchen stove on the first floor, cleverly hiding the existence of the underground room while allowing the smoke to be carried outside the building.

That secret incinerator was currently powered on, flames roaring loudly inside. The body of the boy Norman had just killed had been thrown inside. But in contrast to the climbing temperature of the flames within...

"Mr. Norman was terrifying..."

"Yeah, I've never seen him so mad before."

The thugs waiting beside the incinerator shuddered, goose bumps spreading across their bodies. They had caught a glimpse of bottomless insanity in the way Norman had punished Takahisa and Julia.

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep well for a while."

"Was it really the hero that we killed?"

"What if we get cursed for it?"

A cold chill ran down the thugs' backs as they spoke. Just then, a dull bang came from the incinerator.

"Huh?!"

The thugs startled and turned to look at the incinerator.

“Wh-What was that just now...?”

“I heard it too. A sound.”

“Don’t tell me... Are we seriously gonna get cursed?”

“Stop it! It’s all because you brought it up!”

The thugs were all frightened after assisting in the murder of a hero.

At that very moment, someone appeared in the doorway of the incinerator room. It was Nick, the mercenary Norman had hired.

“Hey, you guys.” Nick greeted the scared thugs with a casual wave.

“Oh, Nick!”

The thugs let out a sigh of relief at the entrance of a familiar face. The thugs in the room had all joined the organization in their early childhood and been raised within the group. To them, a mercenary from outside the capital was an outsider.

However, Nick’s abilities, work ethic, and good-humored personality, along with the fact he had been directly scouted by the higher-ups of the organization, made him a trusted member among them.

“What an unlucky day, huh?” Nick said to the thugs with a shrug.

“Did you hear that sound just now, Nick?!”

“Isn’t this bad?!”

“Yeah, what if the hero curses us...”

The thugs had their guards lowered as they spoke to Nick excitedly.

“Sorry,” Nick said, drawing his sword and walking inside. He swung it swiftly three times.

“Huh...?”

The thugs that had been seated while chatting with each other fell from their chairs with no idea what had just happened.

“I’m quitting the organization as of today,” Nick said plainly, looking down at their faces. After returning his sword to its sheath, he scraped out the enchanted gems being used as fuel in the incinerator and began the extinguishing process. Normally, one would wait for the fire to naturally die down, but...

“*Procreo Aqua*. *Aura Flatus*.”

He used magic that created water and wind to accelerate the process.

“Goodness...”

Nick retrieved the contents of the incinerator with an annoyed look: it was Takahisa’s body, which had been cremated to destroy evidence. Although he had only been in the incinerator for a short while, most of his

flesh had already been burned to ash. However...

"Ah..."

Against all expectations, Takahisa let out a groan. Upon closer inspection, his burned body was already healing rapidly.

"Is he seriously still alive? Damn." Nick's face twitched in disbelief, having watched Takahisa get stabbed through the heart so many times with his own eyes. That being said, he couldn't just stand around; Nick retrieved a red essence crystal from his pocket and picked up Takahisa's body in his arms.

"*Transilio*."

He used the disposable teleport crystal and disappeared.

◇ ◇ ◇

Immediately afterwards, Nick stood in the room of a commoner inn in the Galarc Capital with Takahisa in his arms.

"Good work, Nick," a voice praised.

The voice belonged to the ambassador of the Proxia Empire, Reiss, who was seated in a chair.

"As planned, I rescued him after the incineration began. I set the teleport coordinates for sneaking into that underground room perfectly."

"Wonderful. You have done a truly good job today. It was worth making you infiltrate the Galarc underground for this. Now, lay him down on this bed." Reiss personally lifted the blanket and gestured for Takahisa to be laid down.

"I know you said this would happen, but what the hell is up with his body?" Nick asked, looking down at Takahisa in disgust after laying him down.

"It's exactly as I explained. Heroes possess an astounding healing ability. There is a limit to it, but he won't die from just this."

"This barely can be considered healing anymore... It's practically resurrection."

"Indeed," Reiss agreed cheerfully.

"So, what happens after this?"

"Of course, we'll make him indebted to us. But the specifics will depend on his wishes after he wakes up."

"I was there when he was stabbed to death by Norman. Won't he be hostile to me if he sees me?"

"That shouldn't pose much of a problem. You should return to the

organization in the red-light district for now. Before you go, though...”

The cremation advanced the assimilation a decent amount, but this is his first death. It should take some time for him to recover completely.

Reiss observed the state of the unconscious Takahisa on the bed.

“It’ll take some time for him to wake up. Let’s share the information we have first. Please report in as much detail as possible what happened at the scene and how he appeared to you.”

He smirked as he looked down at Takahisa.

◇ ◇ ◇

When was it?

Sendo Takahisa questioned himself in his hazy consciousness.

Oh, that was right. It was when he attended the Galarc Kingdom’s banquet. He had finally reunited with Miharu, Aki, and Masato in this world.

“I want you all to come with me. I want us to all be together from now on. I will protect all of you. I’ll protect you all no matter what.”

Takahisa had passionately declared he would protect the three of them. And Aki had accepted his feelings, but...

Miharu and Masato had rejected him easily. For a man they didn’t even know, whom they hadn’t grown up with.

Takahisa had felt envious of him. He had come out of nowhere, possessed the power to protect the two of them, and actually had a history of protecting them. That had made Takahisa extremely jealous.

Even though the man was a murderer.

“Have you ever killed someone before?”

When Takahisa asked that, *he* had replied without any shame.

“I have.”

The answer was immediate.

“So you’re a murderer...” Takahisa had muttered.

“Indeed I am,” he had acknowledged readily.

He was completely open about it. He didn’t feel any guilt or shame about being a murderer. He was the scummiest bastard.

That’s why Takahisa had looked down on him and scorned him. He utterly despised him. He knew that they would never get along with each other, which was why...

“Miharu won’t be happy being with you. It’d be better for her sake to be with me, the hero. I would be able to protect Miharu.”

Takahisa had challenged him to a duel. As a result, he lost. He lost swiftly. No, he lost pathetically. It was an overwhelming defeat. One that had made him feel so bitter and frustrated... He felt like everyone was saying he was the one in the wrong because he had lost, which made him feel like he was going crazy.

That was why he stubbornly refused to accept it.

"You know, though, Lily. About the heroic power hidden within me. That my power can protect the people closest to me."

He had tried to win Lilianna over to his side by convincing her he had the power to protect Miharu and the others.

"You just lost to Sir Amakawa moments ago. The special ability hidden in your Divine Arms is indeed powerful, but if someone as experienced as him faces you, then even a hero would lose. Please understand that. There are evil deeds in this world that cannot simply be dealt with through power too."

But Takahisa hadn't understood the words of warning Lilianna had given him at the time in the slightest.

"Even so, my answer is that I will protect them. We won't reach an agreement like this, Lily," he had said with the face of an ignorant idiot.

His current self was painfully—and regretfully—aware of what she meant now.

"P-Please, I beg of you... Please forgive Takahisa. I'll do anything. You can make me a slave for the rest of my life. I'll earn lots of money for you. So please, please..."

The sight of Julia rubbing her forehead on the stone floor was burned into Takahisa's memory.

"You heard that stupid woman say she'd earn us lots of money, right? But we were intending on working her to her death anyway, so that wasn't even a bargaining point to begin with. Yet she believed she could negotiate by offering to work for money... Pfft. Ha ha ha ha ha!"

The image of Norman grinning like the devil as he trampled on Julia's feelings was similarly burned into his mind. He couldn't forgive him. He could never, ever forgive him.

But the one he couldn't forgive the most of all was himself, for blindly believing he could easily protect the people important to him. For behind the foolish and pathetic person who had failed to protect Julia.

He was pathetic. He was truly, truly pathetic.

I... I couldn't protect Julia!

That was what frustrated him the most. Above anything else.

He was so bitter and so frustrated.

◇ ◇ ◇

Takahisa stirred on a bed he had no recollection of lying in. It was already close to sunrise.

“Guh... Ugh... Uhhh...”

He was aware he was crying out of frustration. Liquid poured from every orifice on his face. There wasn’t a single thought in his head about where he was, why he was there, or whether he was safe.

He could only think about saving her.

“Uuh... Wuuuh...”

He had to go and save Julia. That was the sole thought in his mind as he sat up without even looking at his surroundings. He attempted to stagger out of the room like that, but...

“Please wait. Where are you going?” Reiss, who had been reading in a chair, called out to Takahisa.

“Ugh...?” It was at that point that Takahisa finally realized someone else was in the room. He wiped his tears and looked at Reiss.

“Never did I think you would leave as soon as you woke up.” Reiss chuckled, closing his book with a snap.

“Who’re you...? Huh?”

His words came out slurred. Come to think of it, Norman had snapped off several of his teeth when he kicked him. Takahisa touched his mouth as he recalled that, but to his surprise, all his teeth were present and aligned. The slurring had been because of how intensely he had been crying.

“I’m the one who saved you, pretty much,” Reiss said with a smile.

“I see... Julia... Julia...”

Unable to think of anything besides Julia, Takahisa continued walking out of the room like a zombie.

“I said to wait. I won’t force you to stay here, but how are you going to reach your destination when you don’t even know where you are? You mumbled something about a brothel in your sleep, but we’re not even in the red-light district right now,” Reiss said, questioning Takahisa’s awareness of the situation.

“There’s a girl I want to save. I have to save her. I have to go...”

At this moment in time, Takahisa didn’t care about anything unrelated to Julia’s rescue. It was possible he didn’t even know why he wanted to

rescue Julia. He had no clear plan; he just wanted to act as quickly as possible and save her. That was clear from his actions and speech right now.

He just returned from the brink of death, so he's still in a vacant state. In that case... Reiss discerned Takahisa's mental state.

"Very well. Then allow me to show you the way," he said, presenting the very option Takahisa desired.

"Huh...?"

"You wish to return to that underground room, yes? I'm offering to send you there. I can sneak you in instantly if I want to."

"Who are you...?"

After a long pause spent on getting his sluggish thoughts back up to speed, that was the vague question that came out. Then...

"How are you connected to them...?" Takahisa expressed wariness towards Reiss.

Even without his thoughts working properly, he could tell the offer was too good to be true. Furthermore...

"Why am I...?"

Alive, was the question Takahisa finally arrived at.

"Wh-What about Julia?! Where's Julia?!"

A tint of sanity finally returned to Takahisa's eyes. He remembered everything that had happened until he lost consciousness—and worried for Julia first and foremost. Then, he seemed to have a flashback to the injustice his mortal enemy Norman had committed against him and Julia.

"U-Ugh!" With the face of an angered ogre, flames of resentment burned in Takahisa's eyes. He would kill him. He wanted to kill him. He was prepared to do anything in order to kill him.

"You can lead me to Julia, right?! Please! Take me there right away!"

Even though he didn't know who the man in front of him was, he asked for his guidance.

"I shouldn't be the one to say this, but shouldn't you be trying to learn more about who I am first? I could be one of Norman's allies, or this could be some kind of trap for you. I may even ask for something in return for taking you there," Reiss pointed out.

"I don't care," Takahisa said instantly.

"Oh?"

"As long as I can save Julia, I don't care about anything else. If you want me to do something in return, just say the word. I'll give you

anything I can offer," Takahisa declared with a steady look.

"So you're prepared to risk everything for a single goal. Rash, but I respect that kind of resolution in a man."

Reiss's expression relaxed in awe.

"Very well. I will bring you to the underground room of that brothel."

He offered a welcoming hand to Takahisa.

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◇ ◇ ◇

There was a large underground space in the high-class brothel that Norman operated. It was connected to the other buildings in the vicinity, making it far larger than the area of the building aboveground. There were countless rooms that existed in this area besides the room Takahisa had been held in and the incinerator room. For example, there were rooms where brothel workers that couldn't be placed upstairs due to special circumstances were confined, and rooms where illegal business was conducted with tight-lipped VIP customers.

Presently, that underground facility was in an uproar. The reason was because of the multiple-murder case that had occurred in the incinerator room—and the disappearance of Takahisa's corpse, which should have been burned to destroy evidence.

In Norman's underground office, the room's owner and his subordinate thugs had gathered together.

"God damn it! Is there still no news?!" Norman yelled angrily.

"S-Sorry sir. We've searched the entire underground space, but..."

But they had failed to find Takahisa's corpse anywhere, the thugs reported while exchanging nervous looks.

The thugs in the incinerator room were all dead. No one had witnessed anything. The corpse of Takahisa, who had been thrown into the incinerator, had vanished. There were no clues on who the culprit was, or where Takahisa's body had gone.

"He better not have been taken outside!" Norman was in an absolutely foul mood.

"That should be impossible..."

"There are guards at every exit."

"There were no customers that had any luggage on them today, and none of the organization members carried anything large out either."

There were multiple exits connecting the underground to the surface, and all of them had been guarded. If someone had carried Takahisa's corpse out, they would have noticed right away.

"Tch. What's the meaning of this...?" Norman clicked his tongue in annoyance and pondered. If Takahisa's corpse had been carried up to the surface, things would get problematic if the brothel he managed was suspected. He had finally been feeling better after killing Takahisa, but this turn of events had completely ruined his mood.

However, no matter how vast the underground facility was, there was something strange about how a corpse could have vanished from a closed space. Norman pondered what the possibilities were for something to completely vanish without a trace.

Was it a customer? No, whoever it was targeted that brat's corpse and left. The culprit has to be someone within the group—someone who knows he died here. But why would they take the corpse? To hand him over to the castle?

If that was true, then the one who would benefit the most would be the rival brothels in the red-light district. That, or a subordinate out to kick Norman down from his position.

If it was someone within the group, would they be able to take the corpse outside alone? Could the guards at one of the exits be in on the whole thing?

Once he had that thought, he suddenly found himself unable to trust the men in the room with him.

I wanted to have my fun with her a little longer, but it might be safer to dispose of Julia sooner rather than later.

Julia was still under the impression that Takahisa was alive, so she could pose a potential risk depending on how this case of the missing corpse played out. And so...

"Continue searching the underground. I'm going to the room Julia's confined in. You two over there, follow me. And... Nick, you come too."

◇ ◇ ◇

The underground room Julia was confined in was roughly five square meters in size. The empty room had nothing but a single bed inside.

What's going on out there?

Julia worriedly watched the organization's men rushing up and down the corridor through the iron bars of her door.

Takahisa is safe, right...?

The image of Takahisa being tortured by Norman flashed through her head. Julia hadn't been able to see him since she was removed from the room.

She hoped he was alive. She believed there was no way he was dead, but she couldn't help the uneasiness that surged within her.

I want to know what happened...

Of course, she had tried asking her guard already, but he had just yelled

for her to be quiet. Since her attitude was tied to Takahisa's treatment, she had no choice but to be obedient for now.

But just then...

"Hey, Julia." Norman arrived with Nick and two thugs in tow.

"U-Umm. What happened to Takahisa?"

"Do you want to know?" Norman asked back with a cold grin.

"Yes!"

"Then follow me. I'll take you to the room he was in."

The bars were unlocked, and Julia left the room. Their destination was the room where Norman had killed Takahisa. It was a room used for interrogation and punishment, located a mere ten-second walk from the room Julia was being confined in. They swiftly finished moving rooms and entered the empty room.

"Umm... Where was Takahisa moved to?" Julia asked, looking around.

The room was roughly twenty-five square meters in area, making it more spacious than the room Julia had been confined in. The door was made thick for soundproofing, and no sound from the corridor could be heard once it was shut.

"He died here," Norman said casually, pointing at the spot where he stabbed Takahisa.

"Huh...?"

"I stabbed him through the heart and killed him here."

Julia was so shocked, she could only blink in stunned silence.

"When I told him how you would die after you left the room so happily, he spent his last moments wailing incoherently without any teeth, sounding utterly pathetic."

"Ah... Aaah..." Julia fell down in despair.

"What kind of man bawls his eyes out like that? It was pathetic to watch. I wish I could have shown you the moment he died." Norman crouched down and sneered into Julia's ear.

"Liar!" Julia yelled, tears streaming down her face as she grabbed at Norman.

"Shut up!" Norman punched Julia in the face.

"...!" Julia rolled across the floor with great force.

"The situation's changed. Now that I've decided to get rid of you, I won't be holding back this time. There'll be no more healing magic. I'll punch your face till it changes shape, then kill you. Or should I save your face for last and punch your stomach first?" Norman turned Julia onto her

back and straddled her waist.

“Mm... Ah...” Tears of frustration spilled from Julia’s eyes. She sobbed while blood dripped from her nose. But she was undaunted despite that, struggling to land a punch on Norman.

“Annoying bitch!” Norman’s fist flew into Julia’s stomach.

“Gurgh!”

“Both you and that shitty brat are pests that need to die!” Norman continued hitting Julia’s stomach over and over again.

“M-Mr. Norman!” A thug suddenly ran into the room in a panic.

“Huh?” Norman paused midswing and looked back at him.

“We’re under attack!”

◇ ◇ ◇

A few mere minutes prior, in an empty room under the brothel...

In a room devoid of objects and people, space distorted, and two people appeared: Takahisa and Reiss.

“We’ve arrived. This should be a room in the underground space beneath the brothel,” Reiss said, looking around the room.

“Thank you. Now...” Takahisa materialized his Divine Arms and marched towards the door without hesitation, Reiss following behind him. He threw open the door and stepped out into the corridor, and immediately came across thugs walking down it.

“Huh?” They were first startled by Takahisa suddenly coming out of an abandoned room, but when they noticed the sword in his hand...

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Hey, there’s an intruder!”

They drew their daggers and pounced on Takahisa with open hostility.

A dark shadow fell over Takahisa’s eyes as he glared at the attacking men. He clutched the hilt of his sword as though he were trying to crush it in his fist.

“Haaah!”

Takahisa swung his sword, releasing hellfire from the blade. The flames shot forward several meters, filling the corridor and burning the bodies of the thugs.

“Aaah!”

Several of them writhed as they were burned by the flames, quickly spreading panic to those who hadn’t been burned.

“We are underground, so it might be best to refrain from excessive use

of fire. Save it for the most critical moment."

"Right... I wasn't holding back my power as well as I thought I was. Sorry."

The fire seemed to have been more powerful than Takahisa had intended, as he apologized earnestly.

"No, no..." Reiss shook his head and pointed a finger at the unharmed thugs. A bullet of light appeared at his fingertip before shooting out towards the skulls of the thugs.

"Ugh!"

"Gwah?!"

The light bullets measured several centimeters in diameter and moved at a speed of several hundred kilometers per hour. They shot through their heads, shattering their skulls. The thugs hit directly fell straight to the ground.

"I will support you to the best of my ability, so go wild."

"Thank you..." Takahisa's eyes widened at Reiss's abilities as he thanked him.

"O-Okay..." There was still one man who was unharmed, and he had fallen on his backside. That was only understandable—all his comrades had either been burned in fire or had their skulls shattered in a matter of moments. They'd either been instantly killed or left on the verge of death.

"Aaah!"

"Waaah!"

"It's hot! Too hot!"

These brawny men, who made a living out of violence, were screaming pathetically as they rolled across the ground. But even as he watched them...

People like this deserve to die...

With a completely worn-out expression, Takahisa looked at them with contempt, not feeling any guilt at all.

Oh? This is quite the different personality from what I had heard.

Reiss smiled faintly at the thought of how the incident this time must have taken quite the toll on Takahisa.

"Hey, what's going on?!"

"Wha...?!"

The new reinforcements that came running spotted their burning comrades and were rendered speechless. Reiss immediately shot his light bullets through their skulls too, silencing them.

“E-Eek...”

The man on his backside desperately tried to back away from Takahisa and Reiss, unable to stand up. Takahisa went up to him and grabbed him roughly by the collar.

“Hey, where is Julia?”

“Guh... Ugh...”

The man was sweating profusely and groaning in pain.

“Answer me! Where is Julia?!”

“Ugh! S-Stop, please!”

“Answer the question!”

Takahisa easily lifted the man who weighed over ninety kilograms by the collar and slammed him into the wall. As someone who had never used any violence in his life before, Takahisa showed no moderation in the strength he was using now.

“Aha ha... N-Norman! Mr. Norman took her away! Over there, on the right!” The man pointed down the corridor.

“Norman?!” Takahisa channeled even more hatred into his hands.

“S-Stop, don’t kill me!”

“Stop? Don’t kill you?”

What was this scum saying after all the harm he had done to others? After locking up a girl in a place like this?

“Shut your mouth...!” Takahisa yelled, strongly pushing the man’s body into the wall while still holding him by the collar. That seemed to apply a considerable amount of pressure, as the sensation of the wall and the man’s flesh and bones being crushed together could be felt.

“Uh...” The man’s body, which had been tensed up in fear, lost its strength.

“It seems Miss Julia is over there.” Reiss pointed in the direction they were headed next.

“Let’s go.”

Without a glance at the corpses littering the floor, Takahisa headed to Julia’s rescue. He frowned at the girls locked behind iron-bar doors that he passed on the way, but he headed straight for his destination, prioritizing Julia’s rescue.

Reiss’s bullets of light took out all the thugs they encountered before they could attack them. There was one man who ran to the room Norman was beating Julia in.

“M-Mr. Norman! We’re under attack! Gah!”

As soon as he gave his report, Reiss's light bullet struck him in the back of the head.

"Looks like that's the room."

"Julia!" Takahisa ran, charging into the room.

"Y-You... How are you alive?" Norman's eyes were wide in shock. Takahisa, whom he was sure he had killed by stabbing him through the heart multiple times, had rushed in looking the picture of health. He had never expected him to come back to life just because his corpse had gone missing. There was no way he wouldn't be astonished.

"Ah... Taka...hisa..."

Straddled by Norman, Julia's nose was bleeding and tears were streaming down her swollen face.

"NORMAAAN!"

Takahisa roared with hatred as soon as he saw the state that Julia was in.

"G-Get away! Don't you care about what happens to her?!" Frightened, Norman quickly grabbed Julia as a hostage.

"Let go of Julia!"

"L-Like I'd do that! You guys, get him!" Norman adjusted his position and lifted Julia up, then ordered his subordinates to attack.

"Guh!"

The thugs drew their daggers, but Takahisa approached the thugs first, swinging his Divine Arms.

"Haaah!" The sword, swung with enhanced physical strength, easily separated the first man's body into two.

"Ack!" The other thug cowered in fear, but Takahisa immediately cut him down too. With this, the only guard Norman had left was Nick.

"F-Freeze! Don't move! Or I really will kill this woman! What are you doing, Nick?! Hurry and get...!" Norman yelled at Nick as he pulled Julia close to him.

"Sorry, Mr. Norman." Nick attacked Norman with his bare hands from behind, pulling him away from Julia.

Norman fell on his backside and yelled, "H-Hey! What are you—?!"

"He's one of our comrades. Don't attack him," Reiss said to Takahisa, stopping him from attacking Nick.

"H-Hah? Nick, you traitor!"

It was at this moment that Norman finally realized Nick was the traitor; he was astounded. Seeing as he had already assumed there was an internal

traitor, he had naturally considered the possibility of said traitor being Nick; however, he hadn't been sure. He couldn't have expected to be betrayed with this timing, and his expression showed how he was plunged into despair.

"My contract with you ends today. *Cura.*"

Nick picked up Julia and walked over to the side of the room with Takahisa and Reiss. He then used healing magic on her face. It didn't close her wounds instantly, but healing light covered her face. That was enough for Takahisa to trust Nick for the moment.

"There's no one left to protect you," he said, strengthening his grip on his sword as he approached Norman.

"D-Don't come near me!" Norman stood up and drew his dagger in a panic, pointing the tip at Takahisa. He slowly backed away until his back touched the wall.

"I will never forgive you. I won't let you die easily." Flames rose along Takahisa's blade. They burned a dark black color, as though they were linked to his heart.

"F-Fuck off! You started all of this when you killed Sammy! That stupid woman over there is legally our slave! Do you think you can do whatever you want just because you're a hero?!" Norman shouted what he could at Takahisa.

"Those should be my words. You scum...!" With the face of a demon, Takahisa braced his sword without any hesitation.

"Screw you!" Norman charged at Takahisa, roaring as he tried to slash him.

"Aaah!" Takahisa yelled angrily as he charged at Norman with his sword thrust forward. The tip of his blade was aimed directly at Norman's heart. He proceeded to move with absurd physical strength and speed, stabbing the sword into the wall through the body.

"Gahhh..." The impact shattered his entire body, making Norman groan like his organs had flipped. The dagger in his hand clattered to the floor noisily.

"Phew... Phew..." Takahisa glared at Norman's dying face without blinking. Norman narrowed his eyes and glared back even as the light in them faded. The black flames burning Takahisa's sword transferred to Norman's body.

"I'll be waiting for you...in hell..." In the final moment before his face was swallowed by the flames, Norman smiled thinly. Takahisa withdrew

his sword and Norman’s burning corpse fell to the floor. He continued glaring at Norman’s burning body.

“Ta...kahisa...”

“Huh?!” The sound of Julia’s voice behind him snapped him back to his senses.

“It’s difficult to treat her like this. Could you carry her instead?” Nick said, approaching Takahisa to hand Julia over to him.

“Yeah...” Takahisa erased his Divine Arms and accepted Julia’s body with trembling arms.

“Ehe heh... Thank you... My hero... I’m glad you’re alive,” Julia said, thanking Takahisa with a happy smile before passing out from exhaustion.

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“There is no risk to her life, and her beautiful face will return to normal. I will heal her too,” Reiss said, casting healing spirit arts on Julia.

“Thank you very much...” Takahisa’s face crumpled from being on the verge of tears as he bowed his head deeply.

“Please lift your head. As I said before we came here, I’m not helping you out of a pure sense of justice,” Reiss replied cheerfully.

“I know. I’ll become the Proxia Empire’s hero, as promised. But there’s one last thing I’d like to do.”

“What would that be?”

“I want to free all the girls locked both above- and belowground and destroy this brothel. A place like this needs to disappear from this world. I won’t allow them to commit such atrocities ever again,” Takahisa declared with contempt.

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About ten minutes later...

Dawn had just arrived, and there was still a dim gloominess to the sky. In the red-light district of the capital, a gigantic pillar of fire rose up. The flames engulfed only the high-class brothel Julia had worked at, swirling high enough to reach the sky. The fire was being controlled by Takahisa’s sword.

“My, my...”

Standing beside Takahisa, Reiss looked up at the flames with wide eyes.

His awakening as a hero is progressing well after all, he thought to himself, impressed.

“Whoa...”

In the nearby alley were the people Takahisa had evacuated from the brothel, as well as a large number of onlookers. They were all captivated by the fantastical sight of the burning flames.

Takahisa was currently standing on the roof of another building, pointing his sword at the brothel in order to control the flames. Julia’s treatment was already done, and Nick was carrying her at the moment. Eventually, the building completely collapsed.

“Let’s go.”

Satisfied, Takahisa made the pillar of fire vanish. He then did the same to his Divine Arms, freeing up his arms to take Julia’s unconscious body from Nick.

“I will ask you one last time. Are you really sure about leaving this nation?” Reiss asked.

Takahisa stared at the castle with a distant look. “Yes. I have no place in that castle,” he spat bitterly.

“Very well. Then please head to the Proxia Empire with Nick first. I have one last matter to attend to before I join you,” Reiss directed, staring at the castle as well.

“Understood.”

“Lead the way, Nick.”

“Of course, My Lord.”

Nick and Takahisa distanced themselves from Reiss.

“*Transilio*.”

They used a disposable teleport crystal. Takahisa, Julia, and Nick disappeared, leaving Reiss alone.

Now, I should go and dispose of the remaining hindrance.

He flew up into the brightening azure sky.

Epilogue

The pillar of fire in the red-light district was visible from the royal castle.

It was eerie, and it was ominous. What was happening? The sky was still dim, yet the castle was in an uproar. A crowd had formed in the garden of the mansion where the girls lived as well.

“Those flames...”

Satsuki’s face tensed as she stared at the burning flames in the distance. The way it was burning was far from natural. Someone had clearly created those flames artificially and was using sorcery or spirit arts to control them. And when Satsuki thought of the ability to control flames, one thing came to mind.

“Don’t tell me...”

Satsuki shook her head, dismissing the thought. Aki and Masato were nearby, looking on uneasily. Eventually, the flames ceased, but the garden of the mansion was silent for a long time.

“H-Hey... Those flames...” Masato eventually said, nervously.

Aki looked around restlessly in order to shake off the bad feeling she had, but Miharu was nowhere to be seen in the garden.

“H-Hey, where’d Miharu go?!” she exclaimed.

Just then, a vast amount of magic essence appeared in the sky above the castle. Feeling pressure great enough to shake the air, those that could sense the essence immediately got ready for combat.

“Is that the presence of a spirit?!”

Sara and the other spirit folk girls looked at the corner of the garden with a gasp. Their contract spirits had informed them of the spirit presence they had detected. Standing there was Aishia, in the middle of putting on her mask.

“Who...?” Everyone tilted their head curiously.

Aishia?! Why did she materialize... No, then that thing must be very bad news.

That is, everyone besides Celia, who guessed at the reason as to why Aishia had appeared. After all, whatever had appeared in the sky had a tremendous amount of essence.

“Run away!” Aishia said, flying up into the air. Even though she was normally detached from her emotions, there was a strong sense of urgency in her voice.

“Everyone, something bad is sure to happen if you stay! Hurry!” Celia said to everyone.

It was at this moment that Miharu came out of the front door of the mansion. She slowly trudged forward with a dazed look on her face.

“This way, Miharu! Quickly!”

Celia called Miharu over to her in a fluster. But Miharu merely came to a stop and stared up at the sky as though she hadn’t heard her.

What’s wrong, Miharu?!

Celia tried to rush over to Miharu, But Miharu opened her mouth.

“*Assumo*.”

“Huh?”

Celia doubted her ears. That *spell? How? Why?* All kinds of questions rushed through her head.

“*Exemplar: Septimum Caelum Vel Persona*.”

Miharu continued reciting the spell and activated her magic.

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Meanwhile, sometime later, far away in the Holy Kingdom of Almada, in the Holy City Tonerico...

It was early morning, not long after the sun started rising. Rio and Sora had decided to go back down into the labyrinth. They were on their way to the giant entrance of the labyrinth when they encountered a familiar face.

“Hey, if it isn’t Rio and Sora. We meet again,” Eru said to them happily.

“You’re...Eru?” Rio and Sora came to a stop and blinked at her.

“The same one you met yesterday.” Eru recounted how they had eaten at a restaurant in the capital together yesterday with a nostalgic look.

“Erm... You remember us?” As a transcendent one and their disciple, Rio and Sora were easily forgotten existences. Rio was extremely surprised to hear she remembered them.

“Like I said, I’m confident in my memory. Besides, it was just yesterday.”

“Well, yes, I suppose...”

“Ah, seeing your faces has made me hungry for paeja again. You promised to treat me to your homemade paeja next time, right?”

“I did... But what are you doing here, Eru?” Confused, Rio kept the conversation going.

“Yesterday, I told you to check out the labyrinth yourself if you were interested in it, right? So I figured I’d meet you two again if I waited here. It was exactly as I expected,” Eru said with a shady smile.

“I see... That’s an incredible coincidence... No, or was it a coincidence?” Rio tilted his head as he said that out loud.

“Perhaps it was inevitable, considering the relationship between you and me. No, between all of us. Sora included,” Eru said, looking at Sora.

“Inevitable?” Rio stiffened a little.

“Yes. The truth is, I was going to tell you something important if I met you today. A secret just between the three of us.”

“What kind of secret?”

“Regarding your— Huh?”

Just as Eru was about to say her important secret, the space around Rio distorted. The last thing he saw was Eru moving her mouth to say something...before the distortion in space swallowed him and Sora. The two suddenly vanished.

“Oh, my...” Eru was left behind by herself. After a while, she sighed with equal parts frustration and exasperation.

“Good grief... This is that woman’s fault, isn’t it?” she mumbled with a pout.

“It seems like this future was predicted, big brother.”

She gazed in the direction of the bright sun rising in the east, the direction of the Galarc Kingdom.

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 24 - Sacred Flames of Darkness*.

Thanks to the support of the readers and everyone involved, volume 24 was able to go on sale. I'd like to use this space to offer my sincerest gratitude.

So, how did you all enjoy volume 24? As you would know if you looked back on volumes 10 and 20, *Seirei Gensouki* is a story that cycles through introduction, development, twist, and conclusion every ten volumes.

Whether I continue at this pace or not, the cycle that started in volume 21 has reached its "development" as of volume 24. And in order to lead directly to the "twist," I set off an extremely captivating bomb in the last scene of the epilogue.

As written in the preview for the next volume, the subtitle of volume 25 will be "Our Hero." I won't say for what, but I've kept you all waiting a long time. Please predict whom "Our Hero" is referring to and look forward to volume 25.

At any rate, in order to scatter foreshadowing for the future through volumes 21 to 24, I had to lavishly depict a story that could only be told in Rio's absence. And so, I chose the person—the man—who would be most affected by that absence.

With that in mind, I thought a lot about what *he* would most likely do if Rio didn't exist. That result was volume 24, which shows how *he* changed his existing values. What would it take for someone to change a firm value of theirs? It can't be easy to change—that's what I concluded after gathering all my thoughts, resulting in the series of events that led to the volume being subtitled "Sacred Flames of Darkness." I figured "he" would never be in the spotlight like this ever again, so I moved my pen with determination.

There was actually a route where "he" was caught in a badger game, but that idea ended up shelved. If something similar ever happens in the web novel, I might try depicting that route instead. Sorry if I don't.

It's been a while since I've received so many pages for the afterword—

I can still write another page! And so, time for some advertisements.

Let's talk about the drama CD! That's right, the drama CD! The drama CD version of *Seirei Gensouki* volume 24 is going on sale at the same time as the general release. I was in charge of the drama CD script again this time. Unlike the dark atmosphere of the main story, the drama CD focused on laughter this time around. Since Rio and the heroines couldn't interact in the main story, people who would like to refill on Rio and the heroines flirting merrily should definitely listen to the drama CD. I think it was done very entertainingly (I'm confident about it).

This one was titled *Professor Celia's Exciting Magical Radio*, inspired by *Professor Celia's Exciting Magical Classroom* by Futago Minaduki, who's in charge of the comic version. As you can guess from the title, it's an extraordinary story that deviates from the main story. But that's why there are interactions between many different characters, and Sora's there too! It is a drama CD, after all. You'll be able to enjoy their conversation fully voiced!

Finally, the *Seirei Gensouki* Exclusive Shop is opening in 2023 from August 18 to September 3 in Akihabara. Details are on Melonbooks' official site and Twitter, so please come visit if you can!

That's all for this volume. Let's meet again in volume 25!

Yuri Kitayama
June 2023

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Bonus Short Story

Pajama Party with Three Reincarnates

Before Rio became a transcendent one, back when he still lived in the Galarc Castle mansion, Liselotte visited the mansion for a sleepover. That night, Rio was reading alone in his room when someone knocked on the door.

“Yes?”

“It’s me!” Latifa’s voice called back through the door.

“You can come in,” Rio said with a gentle smile, closing his book and putting it down on the desk. The door opened and Latifa came in wearing her nightgown.

“P-Pardon the intrusion.”

Liselotte was with her. Like Latifa, she was wearing a nightgown too. There was a shy blush on her face, possibly because she was embarrassed at having Rio see her like that.

“Liselotte?” Rio said, slightly taken aback.

“Sorry to disturb you at this late hour.” Liselotte pinched the hem of her skirt and looked down in embarrassment.

“No, it was Latifa who brought you here... I should be the one thanking you for treating my little sister so well,” Rio said with a smile. “Please, have a seat on the bed.” There were no other chairs that they could sit on, so he invited them to sit down on his bed.

“Okay!”

“If you don’t mind...”

Latifa made herself at home while Liselotte hesitantly sat on the edge of the bed. It was actually her first time visiting a man’s bedroom, so it was only natural for her to be nervous.

This is the bed where Haruto normally sleeps...

Once she sat down, Liselotte gently brushed her hand against the blanket. She felt awkwardly aware of the situation and blushed harder.

“Heh heh heh! This is where he normally sleeps! Hiyah!” In order to ease Liselotte’s nerves, Latifa tackled her down onto the bed.

“H-Hey, Latifa!” Liselotte shrieked, red in the face.

“Heh heh. Isn’t his bed soft? Perfect for rolling on! And hugging!” Latifa rolled on the bed while clinging to Liselotte. The movement caused her skirt to shift dangerously.

“Calm down, Latifa. Don’t cause trouble for Liselotte.” Rio awkwardly averted his gaze and scolded her.

“Okay!” Latifa obediently stopped moving, but she remained on the bed with her arms around Liselotte.

“Sorry about this, Liselotte.”

“N-No, I’m sorry for making a mess of your sheets. And for lying down on your bed without asking...”

“Don’t worry. I’m used to it. It isn’t much, but make yourself comfortable.” Rio took out drinks from the Time-Space Cache and placed them on the table.

“Thank you very much.”

“I brought Liselotte here so we could talk before bed! Let’s chat together!” Latifa finally released Liselotte and sat back up to explain why they were there. Liselotte sat down beside her again.

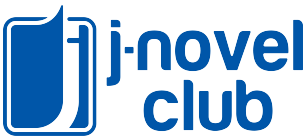
“I see. What would you like to chat about?” Rio sat in his chair and faced the two of them.

“Since it’s just the three of us right now, let’s talk about our lives before we were reincarnated! That’s why I brought Liselotte over!” Latifa suggested, eyes sparkling in excitement.

“Our lives before... All right.” Rio briefly had a distant look in his eyes, but quickly smiled and nodded.

“Yay!”

And so, that night the three of them discussed their past lives.



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